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(PCT Rule 61.2)

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To:

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2011 South Clark Place Room  
CP2/5C24  
Arlington, VA 22202  
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Date of mailing (day/month/year) 06 July 2001 (06.07.01)	
International application No. PCT/ZA00/00160	Applicant's or agent's file reference INT1007/MAJR
International filing date (day/month/year) 05 September 2000 (05.09.00)	Priority date (day/month/year) 07 September 1999 (07.09.99)
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1. The designated Office is hereby notified of its election made:

☒ in the demand filed with the International Preliminary Examining Authority on:

26 March 2001 (26.03.01)

☐ in a notice effecting later election filed with the International Bureau on:

2. The election ☒ was  
☐ was not

made before the expiration of 19 months from the priority date or, where Rule 32 applies, within the time limit under Rule 32.2(b).

The International Bureau of WIPO 34, chemin des Colombettes 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland Facsimile No.: (41-22) 740.14.35	Authorized officer Tewfik Benyahia (Fax 338.87.40) Telephone No.: (41-22) 338.83.38
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TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VN, YU, ZA, ZW.

**Published:**

— *With international search report.*

- (84) Designated States (*regional*): ARIPO patent (GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZW), Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

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# RECOVERY OF ZINC FROM ZINC BEARING SULPHIDE MINERALS BY BIOLEACHING AND ELECTROWIN- NING

## BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

- 5 This invention relates to the recovery of zinc from zinc bearing sulphide minerals.

Commercial bioleach plants which are currently in operation treating sulphide minerals, typically operate within the temperature range of 40°C to 50°C and rely on sparging air to the bioleach reactors to provide the required oxygen. Operation at this relatively low temperature and the use of air to supply oxygen, limit the  
10 rate of sulphide mineral oxidation that can be achieved.

The use of high temperatures between 50°C and 100°C greatly increases the rate of sulphide mineral leaching.

- 15 The solubility of oxygen is however limited at high temperatures and the rate of sulphide mineral leaching becomes limited. In the case of using air for the supply of oxygen, the effect of limited oxygen solubility is such that the rate of sulphide mineral leaching becomes dependent on and is limited by the rate of oxygen transfer from the gas to the liquid phase <sup>(1,2)</sup>.

- 20 The bioleaching of zinc sulphide minerals is similarly problematic and to the applicant's knowledge no commercial zinc bioleaching plant is in operation.

## SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

- 25 The invention provides a method of recovering zinc from a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry which includes the steps of:
- (a) subjecting the slurry to a bioleaching process,
  - (b) supplying a feed gas which contains in excess of 21% oxygen by volume, to the slurry, and
  - (c) recovering zinc from a bioleach residue of the bioleaching process.

If the slurry contains copper then preferably copper is removed from the bioleach residue before recovering zinc from the slurry.

5 The method may include the step of removing iron from the bioleach residue before recovering zinc therefrom. This may be done in any appropriate way and preferably the iron is precipitated from the bioleach residue by the addition of limestone to the slurry.

10 Zinc may be extracted from the residue in any appropriate way. In one form of the invention the bioleach residue is subjected to a recovery process which includes solvent extraction and an electrowinning process to produce zinc metal cathodes.

Oxygen generated during the zinc electrowinning step may be fed to the feed gas of step (b) or directly to the slurry.

15 Raffinate produced during the solvent extraction step may be supplied to at least one of the following: the bioleaching process of step (a), an external heap leach process, and a zinc oxide leach step.

As used herein "zinc oxide" includes ores or concentrates containing non-sulphide zinc minerals.

20 Acid in the raffinate may be neutralised to produce gypsum and carbon dioxide and to precipitate any co-leached iron.

The neutralisation may be effected by adding limestone or zinc oxide to the raffinate.

25 At least some of the carbon dioxide produced during the neutralisation step may be supplied to the bioleaching process of step (a).

As used herein the expression "oxygen enriched gas" is intended to include a gas, e.g. air, which contains in excess of 21% oxygen by volume. This is an oxygen content greater than the oxygen content of air. The expression "pure oxygen" is intended to include a gas which contains in excess of 85% oxygen by volume. Preferably the feed gas which is supplied to the slurry contains in excess of 85% oxygen by volume i.e. is substantially pure oxygen.

The method may include the step of maintaining the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry within a desired range which may be determined by the operating conditions and the type of microorganisms used for leaching. The applicant has established that a lower limit for the dissolved oxygen concentration to sustain microorganism growth and mineral oxidation, is in the range of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $4.0 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ . On the other hand if the dissolved oxygen concentration is too high then microorganism growth is inhibited. The upper threshold concentration also depends on the genus and strain of microorganism used in the leaching process and typically is in the range of from  $4 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $10 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ .

Thus, preferably, the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry is maintained in the range of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $10 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ .

The method may include the steps of determining the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry and, in response thereto, of controlling at least one of the following: the oxygen content of the feed gas, the rate of supply of the feed gas to the slurry, and the rate of feed of slurry to a reactor.

The dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry may be determined in any appropriate way, e.g. by one or more of the following: by direct measurement of the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry, by measurement of the oxygen content in gas above the slurry, and indirectly by measurement of the oxygen content in off-gas from the slurry, taking into account the rate of oxygen supply, whether in gas enriched or pure form, to the slurry, and other relevant factors.

The method may include the step of controlling the carbon content of the slurry. This may be achieved by one or more of the following: the addition of carbon dioxide gas to the slurry, and the addition of other carbonaceous material to the slurry.

- 5 The method may extend to the step of controlling the carbon dioxide content of the feed gas to the slurry in the range of from 0.5% to 5% by volume. A suitable figure is of the order of 1% to 1.5% by volume. The level of the carbon dioxide is chosen to maintain high rates of microorganism growth and sulphide mineral oxidation.
- 10 The bioleaching process is preferably carried out at an elevated temperature. As stated hereinbefore the bioleaching rate increases with an increase in operating temperature. Clearly the microorganisms which are used for bioleaching are determined by the operating temperature and vice versa. As the addition of oxygen enriched gas or substantially pure oxygen to the slurry has a cost factor it is desirable to operate at a temperature which increases the leaching rate by an amount which more than compensates for the increase
- 15 in operating cost. Thus, preferably, the bioleaching is carried out at a temperature in excess of 40°C.

The bioleaching may be carried out at a temperature of up to 100°C or more and preferably is carried out at a temperature which lies in a range of from 60°C to 85°C.

- 20 In one form of the invention the method includes the step of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature of up to 45°C using mesophile microorganisms. These microorganisms may, for example, be selected from the following genus groups:

*Acidithiobacillus* (formerly *Thiobacillus*); *Leptosprillum*; *Ferromicrobium*; and *Acidiphilium*.

- 25 In order to operate at this temperature the said microorganisms may, for example, be selected from the following species:

*Acidithiobacillus caldus* (*Thiobacillus caldus*); *Acidithiobacillus thiooxidans* (*Thiobacillus thiooxidans*);  
*Acidithiobacillus ferrooxidans* (*Thiobacillus ferrooxidans*); *Acidithiobacillus acidophilus* (*Thiobacillus*

*acidophilus*); *Thiobacillus prosperus*; *Leptospirillum ferrooxidans*; *Ferromicrobium acidophilus*; and *Acidiphilium cryptum*.

If the bioleaching step is carried out at a temperature of from 45°C to 60°C then moderate thermophile microorganisms may be used. These may, for example, be selected from the following genus groups:

*Acidithiobacillus* (formerly *Thiobacillus*); *Acidimicrobium*; *Sulfobacillus*; *Ferroplasma* (*Ferriplasma*); and *Alicyclobacillus*.

Suitable moderate thermophile microorganisms may, for example, be selected from the following species:

*Acidithiobacillus caldus* (formerly *Thiobacillus caldus*); *Acidimicrobium ferrooxidans*; *Sulfobacillus acidophilus*; *Sulfobacillus disulfidooxidans*; *Sulfobacillus thermosulfidooxidans*; *Ferroplasma acidarmanus*; *Thermoplasma acidophilum*; and *Alicyclobacillus acidocaldrius*.

It is preferred to operate the leaching process at a temperature in the range of from 60°C to 85°C using thermophilic microorganisms. These may, for example, be selected from the following genus groups:

*Acidothermus*; *Sulfolobus*; *Metallosphaera*; *Acidianus*; *Ferroplasma* (*Ferriplasma*); *Thermoplasma*; and *Picrophilus*.

Suitable thermophilic microorganisms may, for example, be selected from the following species:

*Sulfolobus metallicus*; *Sulfolobus acidocaldarius*; *Sulfolobus thermosulfidooxidans*; *Acidianus infernus*; *Metallosphaera sedula*; *Ferroplasma acidarmanus*; *Thermoplasma acidophilum*; *Thermoplasma volcanium*; and *Picrophilus oshimae*.

The slurry may be leached in a reactor tank or vessel which is open to atmosphere or substantially closed. In the latter case vents for off-gas may be provided from the reactor.

According to a different aspect of the invention there is provided a method of recovering zinc from a slurry containing zinc bearing sulphide minerals which includes the steps of bioleaching the slurry using suitable



microorganisms at a temperature in excess of 40°C, controlling the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry within a predetermined range, and recovering zinc from a bioleach residue.

Preferably the bioleaching is carried out at a temperature in excess of 60°C.

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The dissolved oxygen concentration may be controlled by controlling the addition of gas which contains in excess of 21% oxygen by volume to the slurry.

Preferably the gas contains in excess of 85% oxygen by volume.

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The bioleach residue may be subjected to a separation step to produce residue solids and solution, and the zinc may be recovered from the solution in any appropriate way.

The invention also extends to a method of enhancing the oxygen mass transfer coefficient from a gas phase to a liquid phase in a zinc bearing sulphide slurry which includes the step of supplying a feed gas containing in excess of 21% oxygen by volume to the slurry.

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The invention further extends to a plant for recovering zinc from a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry which includes a reactor vessel, a source which feeds a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry to the vessel, an oxygen source, a device which measures the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry in the vessel, a control mechanism whereby, in response to the said measure of dissolved oxygen concentration, the supply of oxygen from the oxygen source to the slurry is controlled to achieve a dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry within a predetermined range, and a recovery system which recovers zinc from a bioleach residue from the reactor vessel.

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The said dissolved oxygen concentration may be controlled by controlling the supply of oxygen to the slurry.

The oxygen may be supplied to the slurry in the form of oxygen enriched gas or substantially pure oxygen.

The reactor vessel may be operated at a temperature in excess of 60°C and preferably in the range of 60°C to 85°C.

5 The invention further extends to a method of bioleaching an aqueous slurry containing zinc sulphide minerals which includes the steps of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature above 60°C, and maintaining the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry in the range of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3}$  kg/m<sup>3</sup> to  $10 \times 10^{-3}$  kg/m<sup>3</sup>.

10 Various techniques may be used for controlling the supply of oxygen to the slurry and hence for controlling the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry at a desired value. Use may for example be made of valves which are operated manually. For more accurate control use may be made of an automatic control system. These techniques are known in the art and are not further described herein.

15 As has been indicated oxygen and carbon dioxide may be added to the slurry in accordance with predetermined criteria. Although the addition of these materials may be based on expected demand and measurement of other performance parameters, such as iron(II) concentration, it is preferred to make use of suitable measurement probes to sample the actual values of the critical parameters.

20 For example use may be made of a dissolved oxygen probe to measure the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry directly. To achieve this the probe is immersed in the slurry. The dissolved oxygen concentration may be measured indirectly by using a probe in the reactor off-gas or by transmitting a sample of the off-gas, at regular intervals, to an oxygen gas analyser. Again it is pointed out that measuring techniques of this type are known in the art and accordingly any appropriate technique can be used.

25 A preferred approach to the control aspect is to utilise one or more probes to measure the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry, whether directly or indirectly. The probes produce one or more control signals which are used to control the operation of a suitable valve or valves, e.g. solenoid valves, automatically so that the supply of oxygen to an air stream which is being fed to the slurry is varied automatically in accordance with real time measurements of the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry

Although it is preferred to control the addition of oxygen to a gas stream which is fed to the slurry a reverse approach may be adopted in that the oxygen supply rate to the reactor vessel may be maintained substantially constant and the rate of supply of the sulphide mineral slurry to the reactor vessel may be varied to achieve a desired dissolved oxygen concentration.

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The invention is not limited to the actual control technique employed and is intended to extend to variations of the foregoing approaches and to any equivalent process.

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Sphalerite, a commonly occurring zinc sulphide mineral, is of particular benefit, because it has a high leaching rate, even at typical mesophile operating temperatures, which is further increased at the higher temperatures used with moderate and extreme thermophiles. Thus the benefits of the invention, including a high specific reactor sulphide oxidation duty and reduced specific power requirement for oxidation, are obtained during the bioleaching of zinc bearing sulphide concentrates, even at mesophile operating temperatures.

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Bioleaching fixes the sulphur in the sulphide concentrate ultimately as gypsum, rather than as sulphuric acid in conventional processes. Thus there always exists the need to fix sulphur as gypsum. If oxide zinc bearing ore or concentrates are available, they usually have a significant carbonate related gangue acid requirement. The gangue acid requirement can therefore be used to fix sulphur as gypsum, simultaneously solubilising the zinc content, reducing or eliminating the need for additional sulphuric acid for the treatment of these zinc oxide materials. For example a zinc oxide ore with a gangue acid consumption of 200kg sulphuric acid per tonne of ore could be processed using the acid generated from a zinc sulphide bioleach. If only 50% of the zinc oxide ore sulphuric acid requirement were to be met in this way, a 1 million tonnes per annum oxide leach would save US\$5 million per annum at a sulphuric acid price of US\$50 per tonne. The dilute sulphuric acid used for leaching of these zinc oxide materials would come either from a solvent extraction raffinate or from spent electrolyte, depending on the route chosen for zinc recovery.

Zinc may be recovered from solution by any appropriate process, for example by direct electrowinning, (after purification of the solution by zinc dust precipitation), by solvent extraction or by resin-in-pulp (applied to the slurry), followed by electrowinning.

- 5 If electrowinning is selected as the production method for zinc, the oxygen generated at the anode in the electrowinning process may be used to supplement that used in the bioleach process, reducing the capital and operating costs required for oxygen production.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

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The invention is further described by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

Figure 1 is a schematic representation of a portion of a plant in which the invention is carried out,

Figures 2 to 4 show various results and parameters obtained from operating a bioreactor in the manner described herein with reference to Figure 1,

- 15 Figure 5 is a flow chart of a zinc recovery process according to the invention, and  
Figure 6 illustrates a variation to the process shown in Figure 5.

#### DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

##### 20 General Principles

The limitation of low oxygen solubility during bioleaching, using air, at high temperatures, which in turn limits the rate of reaction, requires enrichment of the air with oxygen i.e. air with an oxygen content greater than 21% by volume, or the use of pure oxygen (defined as being greater than 85% oxygen by volume). The use  
25 of oxygen enriched air or pure oxygen overcomes the limited rate of reaction due to oxygen supply constraints, but has two major disadvantages:

- a) the provision of oxygen enriched air or pure oxygen is expensive and requires a high utilisation (>60%) of the oxygen to warrant the additional expense <sup>(3)</sup>; and

- b) if the oxygen level in solution becomes too high microorganism growth is prevented and sulphide mineral bioleaching stops <sup>(4)</sup>.

Therefore, in order to realise the benefits of high rates of sulphide mineral leaching at high temperatures in commercial bioleaching plants, the drawbacks of requiring expensive oxygen and the risk of failure if the dissolved oxygen levels become too high must be overcome.

The bioleaching of sulphide minerals at an elevated temperature results in a high rate of sulphide mineral oxidation, but is dependent on the supply of oxygen and carbon dioxide to maintain high rates of sulphide mineral oxidation and of microorganism growth at adequate rates. The absorption of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the bioleaching reactor is limited, in each case, by the rate of mass transfer from the gas phase into the solution phase. For oxygen the rate of oxygen absorption is defined by equation (1) as follows:

$$R = M \cdot (C^* - C_L) \quad (1)$$

- where:
- $R$  = Oxygen demand as mass (kg) per unit volume ( $m^3$ ) per unit time(s) ( $kg/m^3/s$ ),
  - $M$  = Oxygen mass transfer coefficient in reciprocal seconds ( $s^{-1}$ ),
  - $C^*$  = Saturated dissolved oxygen concentration as mass (kg) per unit volume ( $m^3$ ) ( $kg/m^3$ ),
  - and
  - $C_L$  = Dissolved oxygen concentration in solution as mass (kg) per unit volume ( $m^3$ ) ( $kg/m^3$ ).

The factor  $(C^* - C_L)$  is referred to as the oxygen driving force. A similar equation may be used to describe the rate of carbon dioxide supply to the solution. If the sulphide mineral oxidation rate is increased the oxygen demand increases proportionately. To meet a higher oxygen demand either the oxygen mass transfer coefficient ( $M$ ) or the oxygen driving force  $(C^* - C_L)$  must be increased.

An increase in the oxygen mass transfer coefficient may be achieved by increasing the power input to the bioleach reactor mixer. This improves gas dispersion in the sulphide mineral slurry. With this approach, however, an increase in the oxygen mass transfer coefficient of, for example, 40% requires an increase in the power input to the mixer by a factor of as much as 200%, with a commensurate increase in operating costs.

The oxygen driving force may be increased by increasing the saturated dissolved oxygen concentration  $C^*$  and reducing the dissolved oxygen content or concentration  $C_L$ .

Microorganism population growth is limited or prevented if the dissolved oxygen concentration  $C^*$  reaches too high a level. A concentration level above  $4 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  has been found to be detrimental to *Sulfolobus*-like strains. Certain *Acidithiobacillus* strains, however, have been found to be tolerant to dissolved oxygen concentrations of up to  $10 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ .

The applicant has established that a lower limit for the dissolved oxygen concentration to sustain microorganism growth and mineral oxidation is in the range of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $4.0 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ . Thus, in order to provide an adequate, or optimum, supply of oxygen, the dissolved oxygen content or concentration in the sulphide mineral slurry must be monitored and, where appropriate, the addition of oxygen to the sulphide mineral slurry must be controlled in order to maintain the minimum dissolved oxygen concentration in solution at a value of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $4.0 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ .

On the other hand the dissolved oxygen concentration must not exceed an upper threshold value at which microorganism growth is prevented. It is pointed out that the upper threshold concentration depends on the genus and strain of microorganism used in the bioleaching process. A typical upper threshold value is in the range of from  $4 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $10 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ .

As has been previously indicated the rate of sulphide mineral oxidation, which can be achieved when operating at a relatively low temperature of the order of from  $40^\circ\text{C}$  to  $55^\circ\text{C}$ , is limited. In order to increase the rate of oxidation it is desirable to make use of thermophiles and to operate at temperatures in excess of  $60^\circ\text{C}$ . Any suitable microorganism capable of operating within this temperature range may be used. The optimum operating temperature is dependent on the genus and type of microorganism used. Thus moderate thermophiles of the type *Sulfobacillus* are suitable for operating at a temperature of up to  $65^\circ\text{C}$ . Thermophiles of the type *Sulfolobus* are suitable for operating at temperatures of from  $60^\circ\text{C}$  to at least  $85^\circ\text{C}$ . *Sulfolobus metallicus*, for example, shows optimal growth in the temperature range of from  $65^\circ\text{C}$  to  $70^\circ\text{C}$ .

The applicant has established that the operation of the bioleaching process, using a gas enriched with oxygen, or pure oxygen, as the oxidant, at elevated temperatures of from 40°C to 85°C:

increases the specific sulphide oxidation duty of the reactor considerably;

results in an unexpected and significantly enhanced oxygen mass transfer rate;

- 5 increases the oxygen utilisation, providing that the dissolved oxygen concentration is controlled above the point where microorganism growth and mineral oxidation are prevented and below the point at which microorganism growth is inhibited; and

the overall power required for the oxidation of sulphide minerals is significantly reduced.

- 10 The method of the invention represents a significant improvement compared to a bioleach operation carried out at a temperature of from 40°C to 45°C with air.

The controlled addition of oxygen enriched air or pure oxygen directly into the bioreactor improves the oxygen utilisation efficiency. The oxygen utilisation for a conventional commercial bioleach plant (at least 100m<sup>3</sup> in

- 15 volume) operating at from 40°C to 45°C with air may be expected to achieve a maximum oxygen utilisation factor of from 40% to 50%. Consequently only 40% to 50% of the total mass of oxygen supplied to the bioleach plant is used to oxidise the sulphide minerals. With the method of the invention the oxygen utilisation is significantly higher, of the order of from 60% to 95%. The higher oxygen utilisation is achieved by controlled oxygen addition and results from the enhanced oxygen mass transfer rate and by operating at low  
20 dissolved oxygen concentrations in the solution phase.

It will be appreciated that although high oxygen demand in bioleach reactors has come about primarily by the use of higher temperatures, rapidly leaching sulphide minerals at temperatures below 60°C, using mesophile or moderate thermophile microorganisms, will have similarly high oxygen demands. The method of the  
25 invention is therefore not restricted to suit thermophiles or extreme thermophiles, but also mesophile and moderate thermophile microorganisms.

Another advantage of using air enriched with oxygen or pure oxygen is that the evaporation losses are reduced, because there is less inert gas removing water vapour from the top of the reactor. This is particularly important in areas where water is scarce or expensive.

5 In carrying out the method of the invention the temperature of the slurry in the bioleach vessel or reactor may be controlled in any suitable way known in the art. In one example the bioleach reactor is insulated and heating takes place by means of energy which is released by the oxidation of sulphides. The temperature of the slurry is regulated using any suitable cooling system, for example an internal cooling system.

10 Table 1 shows typical data for specific sulphide oxidation duty and oxygen utilisation, when bioleaching with air at 40°C to 45°C, in two commercial bioreactors, Plant A and Plant B respectively, (greater than 100m<sup>3</sup> in volume).

Table 1 Commercial Bioreactor Performance Results

Description	Units	Plant A	Plant B
Reactor temperature	°C	42	40
Reactor operating volume	m <sup>3</sup>	471	896
Oxygen utilisation	%	37.9	43.6
Typical dissolved oxygen concentration	mg/l	2.5	2.7
Oxygen mass transfer coefficient	s <sup>-1</sup>	0.047	0.031
Specific oxygen demand	kg/m <sup>3</sup> /day	21.6	14.8
Specific sulphide oxidation duty	kg/m <sup>3</sup> /day	8.9	5.7
Specific power consumption per kg sulphide oxidised	kWh/kgS <sup>2-</sup>	1.7	1.8

At low temperatures (40°C – 50°C), with air as the inlet gas, which applies to the results for the commercial reactors, Plant A and Plant B, presented in Table 1, the oxygen utilisations achieved are expected and the oxygen mass transfer coefficients (M) correspond to the applicant's design value. The applicant has



determined that if the method of the invention were to be applied to Plant A, the plant performance would be significantly increased, as indicated by the results presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Predicted Improvement In Commercial Bioreactor Performance

	Units	Plant A - typical operation	Plant A - using the method of the invention
Reactor temperature	°C	42	77
Microbial type strain	-	<i>Acidithiobacillus</i>	<i>Sulfolobus</i>
Inlet gas oxygen content	% by volume	20.9	90.0
Oxygen utilisation	%	37.9	93.0
Typical dissolved oxygen concentration	mg/l	2.5	2.5
Specific oxygen demand	kg/m <sup>3</sup> /day	21.6	59.5
Specific sulphide oxidation duty	kg/m <sup>3</sup> /day	8.9	24.5
Specific power consumption per kg sulphide oxidised	kWh/kgS <sup>2-</sup>	1.7	1.2

The results clearly show the benefit of the invention in achieving higher rates of reaction by the combination of bioleaching at high temperature, adding oxygen enriched gas and by controlling the dissolved oxygen concentration to a predetermined low level (e.g.  $0.2 \times 10^{-3}$  kg/m<sup>3</sup> to  $4.0 \times 10^{-3}$  kg/m<sup>3</sup>). The specific sulphide oxidation duty of the reactor is increased by almost threefold. Clearly the upper dissolved oxygen concentration should not be increased above a value at which microorganism growth is inhibited or stopped.

Even though additional capital for the production of oxygen is required, the savings in reactor and other costs at least offset this additional expense. Additionally, the specific power consumption per kg sulphide oxidised is decreased by approximately one-third. In a plant oxidising 300 tonnes of sulphide per day, the power saving, assuming a power cost of US\$0.05 per kWh, would amount to US\$2.8 million per annum. The high oxygen utilisation and increased specific sulphide oxidation capacity of the reactor represent in combination a considerable improvement over conventional bioleaching practice conducted at lower temperatures, with oxygen supplied by air.

Bioleaching Plant

Figure 1 of the accompanying drawings shows a bioleaching plant 10 in which bioleaching is carried out, in accordance with the principles of the invention.

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The plant 10 includes a bioreactor 12 with an agitator or mixer 14 which is driven by means of a motor and gearbox assembly 16.

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In use a tank or vessel 18 of the reactor contains a sulphide mineral slurry 20. An impeller 22 of the agitator is immersed in the slurry and is used for mixing the slurry in a manner which is known in the art.

A probe 24 is immersed in the slurry and is used for measuring the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry. A second probe 26, inside the tank 18 above the surface level 28 of the slurry, is used for measuring the carbon dioxide content in the gas 30 above the slurry 20.

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An oxygen source 32, a carbon dioxide source 34 and an air source 36 are connected through respective control valves 38, 40 and 42 to a sparging system 44, positioned in a lower zone inside the tank 18, immersed in the slurry 20.

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The probe 24 is used to monitor the dissolved oxygen concentration in the sulphide mineral slurry 20 and provides a control signal to a control device 46. The control device controls the operation of the oxygen supply valve 38 in a manner which is known in the art but in accordance with the principles which are described herein in order to maintain a desired dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry 20.

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The probe 26 measures the carbon dioxide content in the gas above the sulphide mineral slurry 20. The probe 26 provides a control signal to a control device 48 which, in turn, controls the operation of the valve 40 in order to control the addition of carbon dioxide from the source 34 to a gas stream flowing to the sparger 44.

The air flow rate from the source 36 to the sparger 44 is controlled by means of the valve 42. Normally the valve is set to provide a more or less constant flow of air from the source 36 to the sparger and the additions of oxygen and carbon dioxide to the air stream are controlled by the valves 38 and 40 respectively. Although this is a preferred approach to adjusting the oxygen and carbon dioxide contents in the air flow to the sparger other techniques can be adopted. For example it is possible, although with a lower degree of preference, to adjust the air stream flow rate and to mix the adjustable air stream with a steady supply of oxygen and a variable supply of carbon dioxide, or vice versa. Another possibility is to have two separate air stream flows to which are added oxygen and carbon dioxide respectively. Irrespective of the technique which is adopted the objective remains the same, namely to control the additions of oxygen and carbon dioxide to the slurry

20.

Slurry 50 is fed from a slurry feed source 52 through a control valve 54 and through an inlet pipe 56 into the interior of the tank 18. The slurry feed rate may be maintained substantially constant, by appropriate adjustment of the valve 54, to ensure that slurry is supplied to the tank 18 at a rate which sustains an optimum leaching rate. The supplies of air, oxygen and carbon dioxide are then regulated, taking into account the substantially constant slurry feed rate, to achieve a desired dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry 20 in the tank, and a desired carbon dioxide content in the gas 30 above the slurry. Although this is a preferred approach it is apparent that the slurry feed rate could be adjusted, in response to a signal from the probe 24, to achieve a desired dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry. In other words the rate of oxygen addition to the slurry may be kept substantially constant and the slurry feed rate may be varied according to requirement.

Another variation which can be adopted is to move the probe 24 from a position at which it is immersed in the slurry to a position designated 24A at which it is located in the gas 30 above the level 28. The probe then measures the oxygen contained in the gas above the slurry i.e. the bioreactor off-gas. The oxygen content in the off-gas can also be used as a measure to control the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry, taking any other relevant factors into account.

Conversely it may be possible to move the carbon dioxide probe 26 (provided it is capable of measuring the dissolved carbon dioxide content) from a position at which it is directly exposed to the gas 30 to a position designated 26A at which it is immersed in the slurry in the tank. The signal produced by the probe at the position 26A is then used, via the control device 48, to control the addition of carbon dioxide from the source 34 to the air stream from the source 36.

Although the carbon dioxide source 34, which provides carbon dioxide in gas form, is readily controllable and represents a preferred way of introducing carbon into the slurry 20, it is possible to add suitable carbonate materials to the slurry 50 before feeding the slurry to the reactor. Carbonate material may also be added directly to the sulphide mineral slurry 20 in the reactor. In other cases though there may be sufficient carbonate in the sulphide mineral slurry so that it is not necessary to add carbon, in whatever form, to the slurry nor to control the carbon content in the slurry.

It is apparent from the foregoing description which relates to the general principles of the invention that the supply of oxygen to the slurry is monitored and controlled to provide a desired dissolved oxygen concentration level in the slurry 20. This can be done in a variety of ways e.g. by controlling one or more of the following in an appropriate manner namely: the slurry feed rate, the air flow rate from the source 36, the oxygen flow rate from the source 32, and any variation of the foregoing.

The carbon dioxide flow rate is changed in accordance with the total gas flow rate to the sparger 44 in order to maintain a concentration in the gas phase, i.e. in the gas stream to the reactor, of from 0.5% to 5% carbon dioxide by volume. This carbon dioxide range has been found to maintain an adequate dissolved carbon dioxide concentration in the slurry, a factor which is important in achieving effective leaching.

The addition of oxygen to the sulphide mineral slurry 20 is controlled in order to maintain the minimum dissolved oxygen concentration in solution at a value of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $4.0 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ . The upper threshold value depends on the genus and strain of microorganism used in the bioleaching process and typically is in the range of from  $4 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $10 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ .

Figure 1 illustrates the addition of oxygen from a source 32 of pure oxygen. The pure oxygen can be mixed with air from the source 36. Any other suitable gas can be used in place of the air. The addition of oxygen to air results to what is referred to in this specification as oxygen enriched gas i.e. a gas with an oxygen content in excess of 21% by volume. It is possible though to add oxygen substantially in pure form directly to the  
5 slurry. As used herein pure oxygen is intended to mean a gas stream which contains more than 85% oxygen by volume.

The temperature in the bioleach reactor or vessel may be controlled in any appropriate way using techniques which are known in the art. In one example the tank 18 is insulated and heating takes place by means of  
10 energy which is released by the oxidation of sulphides. The temperature of the slurry 20 is regulated using an internal cooling system 70 which includes a plurality of heat exchanger cooling coils 72 connected to an external heat exchanger 74.

The vessel 18 may be substantially sealed by means of a lid 80. Small vents 82 are provided to allow for the  
15 escape of off-gas. The off-gas may, if required, be captured or treated in any appropriate way before being released to atmosphere. Alternatively, according to requirement, the tank 18 may be open to atmosphere.

The microorganisms chosen for the leaching process will determine the leaching temperature, and vice versa. The applicant has found that a preferred operating temperature is above 60°C, for example in the  
20 range of 60°C to 85°C. In this range thermophilic microorganisms, in any appropriate combination, are employed. In the range of from 45°C to 60°C, on the other hand, moderate thermophiles are employed while at temperatures below 45°C mesophiles are used. These microorganisms may, for example, be chosen from those referred to hereinbefore.

25 Although the benefit of adding oxygen to the slurry which is to be leached, by making use of oxygen enriched air or, more preferably, by making use of substantially pure oxygen i.e. with an oxygen content in excess of 85%, is most pronounced at high temperatures at which greater leaching rates are possible, a benefit is nonetheless to be seen when oxygen enriched air or substantially pure oxygen is added to the slurry at lower temperatures, of the order of 40°C or even lower. At these temperatures the leaching rates are slower than

at elevated temperatures and although an improvement results from using oxygen enriched air the cost thereof is generally not warranted by the relatively small increase in leaching rate.

### Test Results

5

The importance of maintaining an adequate supply of oxygen and hence a sufficiently high dissolved oxygen concentration to sustain microorganism growth and mineral oxidation is shown in the results presented in Figure 2. If the dissolved oxygen concentration is allowed to drop below 1.5 ppm, and particularly below 1.0 ppm, biooxidation becomes unstable, which is indicated by higher iron(II) concentrations in solution, of  
10 greater than 2 g/l. At consistent levels of biooxidation, achieved by maintaining a dissolved oxygen concentration above 1.5 ppm, in this experiment, iron(II) is rapidly oxidised to iron(III), and iron(II) concentrations remain generally below 1.0 g/l.

15

The results presented in Figure 2 were obtained from operation of a first or primary reactor of a continuous pilot plant treating a chalcopyrite concentrate at a feed solids concentration of 10% by mass and a temperature of 77°C, with *Sulfolobus*-like archaea.

20

The effect of increasing the oxygen content of the feed gas to a bioreactor and controlling the dissolved oxygen concentration, in accordance with the principles of the invention, was tested in an experiment using a 5m<sup>3</sup> bioreactor which was operated with a continuous pyrite or blended pyrrhotite and pyrite flotation concentrate feed, at a temperature of about 77°C, using a mixed culture of *Sulfolobus*-like archaea and a solids density of 10% by mass. The carbon dioxide content in the bioleach inlet gas was controlled at a level of between 1 and 1.5 % by volume. The dissolved oxygen concentration was generally within the range  $0.4 \times 10^{-3}$  kg/m<sup>3</sup> to  $3.0 \times 10^{-3}$  kg/m<sup>3</sup>. The results of the experiment are presented in Figure 3.

25

From the graphs presented in Figure 3 it is clear that, when sparging with air (enriched with carbon dioxide: 20.7% oxygen and 1.0% carbon dioxide), the maximum oxygen demand (directly proportional to the sulphide oxidation duty) was limited to 11.3 kg/m<sup>3</sup>/day, since the dissolved oxygen concentration which was achievable using air only (i.e. not enriched with oxygen) was just sufficient to maintain microorganism growth.

By controlling the oxygen content of the inlet gas, the oxygen addition rate, and the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry in the range of  $0.4 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $3.0 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ , the oxygen demand, i.e. the sulphide mineral oxidation rate, was increased dramatically. The dissolved oxygen concentration was controlled to a low value, but above the minimum limit for successful microorganism growth, so that the utilisation of oxygen was maximised. The results show the oxygen demand, or sulphide oxidation duty, was increased by over threefold. Thus by increasing the oxygen content in the inlet gas from 20.7% to a maximum of 90.8% the specific oxygen demand was increased from  $11.3 \text{ kg/m}^3/\text{day}$  to  $33.7 \text{ kg/m}^3/\text{day}$ . In addition, by controlling the dissolved oxygen concentration to a low value, but above the minimum value for sustained microorganism growth, the oxygen utilisation was maximised. The oxygen utilisation showed a general increase with an increase in the oxygen content of the inlet gas from 29% (for an inlet gas oxygen content of 20.7%) to 91% (for inlet gas containing 85.5% oxygen).

The high oxygen utilisations achieved of well over 60% are much better than expected. Analysis of the results indicates that the oxygen mass transfer coefficient (M), as defined by equation (1), is significantly and unexpectedly enhanced for operation of the bioreactor at a high temperature ( $77^\circ\text{C}$ ) and with a high oxygen content in the inlet gas (from 29% to 91% in the experiment). In fact, the oxygen mass transfer coefficient (M) is increased by a factor of 2.69, on average, compared to the applicant's design value. This enhancement is after considering the improvement in the mass transfer coefficient due to temperature, which would be expected to increase the value of M by a factor of 1.59 for a temperature increase from  $42^\circ\text{C}$  to  $77^\circ\text{C}$ , according to the temperature correction factor proposed by Smith et al <sup>(5)</sup>. This correction factor has been demonstrated experimentally to be valid for a temperature in the range of from  $15^\circ\text{C}$  to  $70^\circ\text{C}$  <sup>(6)</sup>.

The determination of the enhanced oxygen mass transfer coefficient is shown from the results presented in Figure 4, where the oxygen demand divided by the design oxygen mass transfer coefficient ( $M_{\text{design}}$ ) is plotted against the oxygen driving force, as defined in equation (1). The slope of the regression line plotted through the data indicates the enhancement in the oxygen mass transfer coefficient by a factor of 2.69.

Process Example

The inventive principles in the preceding section have been described in the context of sulphide minerals in general and, it will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, these principles can be applied in particular to zinc bearing sulphide minerals.

Figure 5 of the accompanying drawings is a process flow chart illustrating the use of the method of the invention for recovering zinc.

In Figure 5 the plant 10 which is shown in Figure 1 and which is described hereinbefore bears the same reference numeral. The oxygen, carbon dioxide and air sources bear the reference numerals 32, 34 and 36 respectively. The zinc bearing sulphide slurry is labelled with the numeral 50.

The slurry 50 is fed to the plant 10 containing one or more bioleach reactors using oxygen enriched gas or pure oxygen, labelled 32, as the oxidant. The oxygen concentration in the reactor is controlled in the manner which has been described hereinbefore depending on the type of microorganism used.

The bioleaching process produces a bioleach residue slurry 100 which contains solubilised zinc and iron, predominantly in the ferric state.

Optionally at this point the bioleach residue slurry 100 may be subjected to a liquid/solid separation step 102 and copper 104, a metal commonly associated with zinc, can be recovered by solvent extraction and electrowinning (106).

Referring again to the main process flow stream iron in the bioleach residue slurry is removed by precipitation (108) brought about by the addition of limestone 110. The resulting slurry 112 is subjected to a liquid/solid separation step 114 producing solids 116 for disposal and a solution 118 which is fed to a zinc solvent extraction step 120. The strip liquor 122 from the solvent extraction step 120 is obtained by stripping the



loaded solvent with spent electrolyte 124 from a subsequent zinc electrowinning step 126 to produce zinc metal cathodes 128.

5 Optionally raffinate 130 from the solvent extraction step 120 is used as a lixiviant for zinc oxide ore 132 (or concentrate if available) in an oxide leach stage 134. Some limestone 136 may be required to neutralise the acid in the raffinate, to produce gypsum and also to precipitate any co-leached iron and to produce carbon dioxide 140. The limestone will be required if the zinc oxide ore or concentrate 132 is not available.

10 The oxide leach/acid neutralisation residue is subjected to a liquid/solid separation step 142 to produce solids 144 for disposal and a solution 146 which is fed to the zinc solvent extraction step 120.

A portion of the raffinate 130 may optionally be recycled to the bioleach plant 10 to satisfy the acid requirement in the bioleaching reactor, or it may be directed to an external heap leach 148, where applicable.

15 If there is insufficient carbonate in the slurry 50 then some of the carbon dioxide 140 generated in the neutralisation step may be added to the slurry, directly, or indirectly, for example by being blended with the oxygen enriched gas 32, or the carbon dioxide from the source 34, to provide the carbon dioxide requirement in the bioleaching phase.

20 Oxygen gas 150 generated at the anode during the electrowinning step 126 may be recycled to supplement the oxygen requirement during the bioleaching step.

Figure 6 illustrates a variation of the process shown in Figure 5. Steps in the process of Figure 6 which are the same as steps in the process of Figure 5 bear similar reference numerals. The following description  
25 relates only to the differences in the processes.

If the solution 118 has a sufficiently high zinc concentration then, instead of using solvent extraction, the solution may be purified by using zinc dust precipitation.

The solution 118 is fed to a purification step 200 in which zinc dust 202 is added to the solution. This causes the precipitation of impurities 204 in accordance with techniques which are known in the art and which consequently are not further described herein.

- 5 The resulting purified solution 206 is fed to the electrowinning step 126. Spent electrolyte 124 is then used in the neutralisation step 134 (instead of the raffinate 130 in Figure 5). The spent electrolyte may also be recycled to the bioleach plant 10 or to the external heap leach 148.

10 The solution 146, in the Figure 6 embodiment, is added to the solution from the solid/liquid separation step 114 to make up the solution 118.

#### Particular Example

15 Bioleach pilot plant test work was completed, using a sphalerite concentrate assaying 52% zinc, on a pilot plant of approximately 1.1 m<sup>3</sup> consisting of 6 reactors configured as 2 primary reactors in parallel followed by 4 secondary reactors in series. The total primary volume was 470l and the total secondary volume was 630l. All test work was carried out at 77°C to 80°C using a zinc bearing sulphide feed slurry containing 7.5% solids. Microorganisms used were a mixed *Sulfolobus*-like archaea. Substantially pure oxygen was fed to the slurry. The oxygen utilisation results obtained in the primary stage during the test work, using analysis of inlet and  
20 outlet gas mixtures, are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 : Primary Reactor Zinc Dissolution and Oxygen Uptake Results for Thermophile Pilot Test Work

Retention Days	Zn Dissolution %	Specific Zn Dissolution Rate kg/m <sup>3</sup> /h	Oxygen Uptake (calculated) kg/m <sup>3</sup> /h	Oxygen Uptake (measured) kg/m <sup>3</sup> /h
1.8	90.4	0.865	0.847	0.856
1.5	88.0	1.010	0.989	0.915

The results in Table 3 may be compared to mesophile results obtained at 40°C to 45°C, as reported in the literature<sup>7</sup>. The test work was completed using a sphalerite concentrate containing 48.6% zinc at a similar grind size. The test results are shown in Table 4. Percentage zinc dissolution and oxygen uptakes were not reported, but were calculated using the specific zinc dissolution rate, assuming all zinc was in the form of sphalerite.

Table 4 : Primary Reactor Zinc Dissolution and Oxygen Uptake Results for Mesophile Bioleaching <sup>(7)</sup>

Solids Content %	Retention Days	Zn Dissolution %	Specific Zn Dissolution Rate kg/m <sup>3</sup> /h	Oxygen Uptake (calculated) kg/m <sup>3</sup> /h
6.7	1.5	55.5	0.42	0.411
12.4	2.1	49.8	0.60	0.587

- 10 The results indicate that the oxygen uptake rate and hence the bioleaching rate may be enhanced by a factor of up to 1.5 to 2 by feeding oxygen enriched air or substantially pure oxygen to the slurry under controlled conditions.

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CLAIMS

1. A method of recovering zinc from a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry which includes the steps of:
  - (a) subjecting the slurry to a bioleaching process;
  - 5 (b) supplying a feed gas which contains in excess of 21% oxygen by volume, to the slurry, and
  - (c) recovering zinc from a bioleach residue of the bioleaching process.
2. A method according to claim 1 wherein copper is removed from the bioleach residue before recovering zinc therefrom.
- 10 3. A method according to claim 1 or 2 which includes the step of removing iron from the bioleach residue before recovering zinc therefrom.
4. A method according to claim 3 wherein the iron is precipitated from the bioleach residue by the  
15 addition of limestone to the residue.
5. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 4 which the bioleach residue is subjected to a recovery process which includes zinc solvent extraction and zinc electrowinning to produce zinc metal cathodes.
- 20 6. A method according to claim 5 wherein oxygen generated during the zinc electrowinning is fed to the feed gas of step (b) or directly to the slurry.
7. A method according to claim 5 or 6 wherein raffinate, produced during the zinc solvent extraction, is  
25 supplied to at least one of the following: the bioleaching process of step (a), an external heap leach process, and a zinc oxide leach stage.

8. A method according to any one of claims 5 to 7 wherein acid in raffinate, produced during the zinc solvent extraction, is neutralized to produce gypsum and carbon dioxide, and to precipitate co-leached iron.
- 5 9. A method according to claim 8 wherein the neutralisation is effected by adding limestone or zinc oxide ore or concentrate to the raffinate.
10. A method according to claim 8 or 9 wherein at least some of the carbon dioxide is supplied to the bioleaching process of step (a).
- 10 11. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 4 wherein the bioleach residue is subjected to zinc dust purification by precipitation and electrowinning to produce zinc metal cathodes.
12. A method according to claim 11 wherein spent electrolyte from the zinc electrowinning is supplied to at least one of the following: the bioleaching process of step (a), an external heap leach process, and a zinc oxide leach stage.
- 15 13. A method according to claim 11 or 12 wherein oxygen generated during the zinc electrowinning is fed to the feed gas of step (b), or directly to the slurry.
- 20 14. A method according to any one of claims 11 to 13 wherein spent electrolyte, from the zinc electrowinning, is neutralised to produce gypsum and carbon dioxide, and to precipitate co-leached iron.
- 25 15. A method according to claim 14 wherein the neutralisation is effected by adding limestone or zinc oxide ore or concentrate to the spent electrolyte.
16. A method according to claim 14 or 15 wherein at least some of the carbon dioxide is supplied to the bioleaching process of step (a).

17. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 16 wherein the feed gas in step (b) contains in excess of 85% oxygen by volume.
18. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 17 which includes the step of maintaining the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry within a desired range.
19. A method according to claim 18 wherein the said dissolved oxygen concentration is maintained in the range of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $10 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ .
20. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 19 which includes the step of controlling the carbon content of the slurry.
21. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 20 which includes the step of controlling the carbon dioxide content of the feed gas in the range of from 0.5% to 5.0% by volume.
22. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 21 which includes the step of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature in excess of  $40^\circ\text{C}$ .
23. A method according to claim 22 wherein the said temperature is in the range of from  $40^\circ\text{C}$  to  $100^\circ\text{C}$ .
24. A method according to claim 23 wherein the said temperature is in the range of from  $60^\circ\text{C}$  to  $85^\circ\text{C}$ .
25. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 21 which includes the step of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature of up to  $45^\circ\text{C}$  using mesophile microorganisms.
26. A method according to claim 25 wherein the microorganisms are selected from the following genus groups: *Acidithiobacillus*; *Thiobacillus*; *Leptosprillum*; *Ferromicrobium*; and *Acidiphilium*.

27. A method according to claim 25 or 26 wherein the said microorganisms are selected from the following species: *Acidithiobacillus caldus* (*Thiobacillus caldus*); *Acidithiobacillus thiooxidans* (*Thiobacillus thiooxidans*); *Acidithiobacillus ferrooxidans* (*Thiobacillus ferrooxidans*); *Acidithiobacillus acidophilus* (*Thiobacillus acidophilus*); *Thiobacillus prosperus*; *Leptospirillum ferrooxidans*; *Ferromicrobium acidophilus*; and *Acidiphilium cryptum*.
28. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 21 which includes the step of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature of from 45°C to 60°C using moderate thermophile microorganisms.
29. A method according to claim 28 wherein the microorganisms are selected from the following genus groups: *Acidithiobacillus* (formerly *Thiobacillus*); *Acidimicrobium*; *Sulfobacillus*; *Ferroplasma* (*Ferriplasma*); and *Alicyclobacillus*.
30. A method according to claim 28 or 29 wherein the said microorganisms are selected from the following species: *Acidithiobacillus caldus* (formerly *Thiobacillus caldus*); *Acidimicrobium ferrooxidans*; *Sulfobacillus acidophilus*; *Sulfobacillus disulfidooxidans*; *Sulfobacillus thermosulfidooxidans*; *Ferroplasma acidarmanus*; *Thermoplasma acidophilum*; and *Alicyclobacillus acidocaldrius*.
31. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 21 which includes the step of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature of from 60°C to 85°C using thermophilic microorganisms.
32. A method according to claim 31 wherein the microorganisms are selected from the following genus groups: *Acidothermus*; *Sulfolobus*; *Metallosphaera*; *Acidianus*; *Ferroplasma* (*Ferriplasma*); *Thermoplasma*; and *Picrophilus*.
33. A method according to claim 31 or 32 wherein the said microorganisms are selected from the following species: *Sulfolobus metallicus*; *Sulfolobus acidocaldarius*; *Sulfolobus*



*thermosulfidooxidans*; *Acidianus infernus*; *Metallosphaera sedula*; *Ferroplasma acidarmanus*; *Thermoplasma acidophilum*; *Thermoplasma volcanium*; and *Picrophilus oshimae*.

- 5 34. A method of bioleaching a slurry containing zinc bearing sulphide minerals which includes the steps of:
- (a) bioleaching the slurry using suitable microorganisms at a temperature in excess of 40°C, and
  - (b) controlling the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry within a predetermined range.
- 10 35. A method according to claim 34 wherein the said dissolved oxygen concentration is controlled by controlling the supply of oxygen to the slurry.
36. A method according to claim 35 wherein the oxygen is supplied to the slurry in the form of oxygen enriched gas or substantially pure oxygen.
- 15 37. A method according to any one of claims 34 to 35 wherein the said temperature is in the range of from 60°C to 85°C.
- 20 38. A method of enhancing the oxygen mass transfer coefficient from a gas phase to a liquid phase in a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry which includes the step of supplying a feed gas containing in excess of 21% oxygen by volume, to the slurry.
39. A method according to claim 38 wherein the feed gas contains in excess of 85% oxygen by volume.
- 25 40. A method according to claim 38 or 39 which includes the step of raising the temperature of the slurry.
41. A method of recovering zinc from a slurry containing zinc bearing sulphide minerals which includes the steps of:
- (a) bioleaching the slurry at a temperature in excess of 40°C,

- (b) controlling the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry within a predetermined range, and
- (c) recovering zinc from a bioleach residue produced in step (a).

5 42. A method according to claim 41 wherein the said dissolved oxygen concentration is controlled by controlling the supply of oxygen to the slurry.

43. A method according to claim 42 wherein the oxygen is supplied to the slurry in the form of oxygen enriched gas or substantially pure oxygen.

10 44. A method according to any one of claims 41 to 43 wherein the said temperature is in the range of from 60°C to 85°C.

15 45. A method of bioleaching an aqueous slurry containing zinc bearing sulphide minerals which includes the steps of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature above 60°C, and maintaining the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry in the range of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $10 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ .

46. A method according to claim 45 wherein the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry is maintained by supplying gas containing in excess of 21% oxygen by volume to the slurry.

20 47. A plant for recovering zinc from a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry which includes a reactor vessel, a source which feeds a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry to the vessel, an oxygen source, a device which measures the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry in the vessel, a control mechanism whereby, in response to the said measure of dissolved oxygen concentration, the supply  
25 of oxygen from the oxygen source to the slurry is controlled to achieve a dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry within a predetermined range, and a recovery system which recovers zinc from a bioleach residue of the reactor vessel.

48. A plant according to claim 47 wherein the oxygen source supplies oxygen in the form of oxygen enriched gas or substantially pure oxygen to the slurry.
49. A plant according to claim 47 or 48 wherein the reactor vessel is operated at a temperature in excess of 60°C.

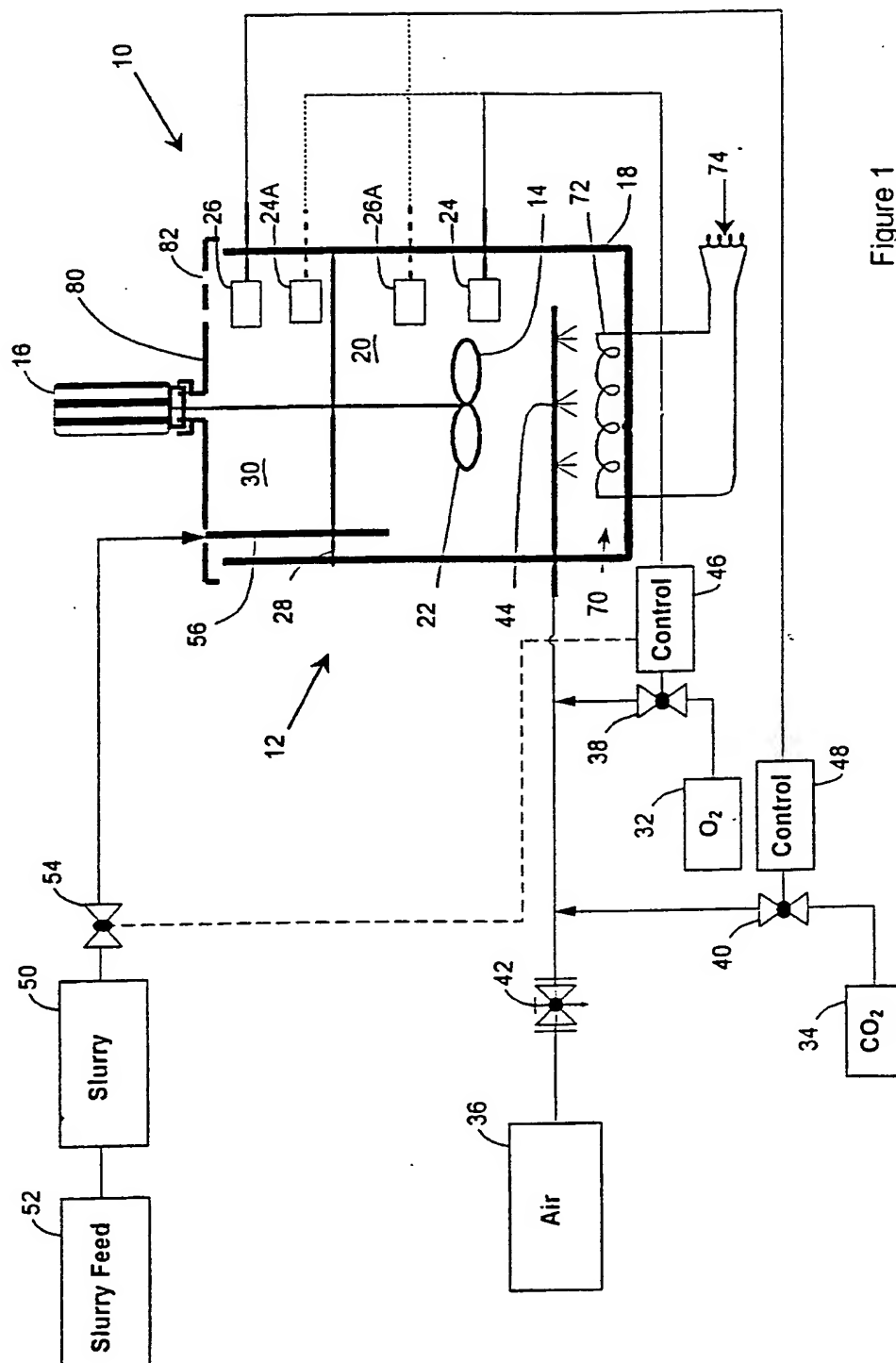


Figure 1

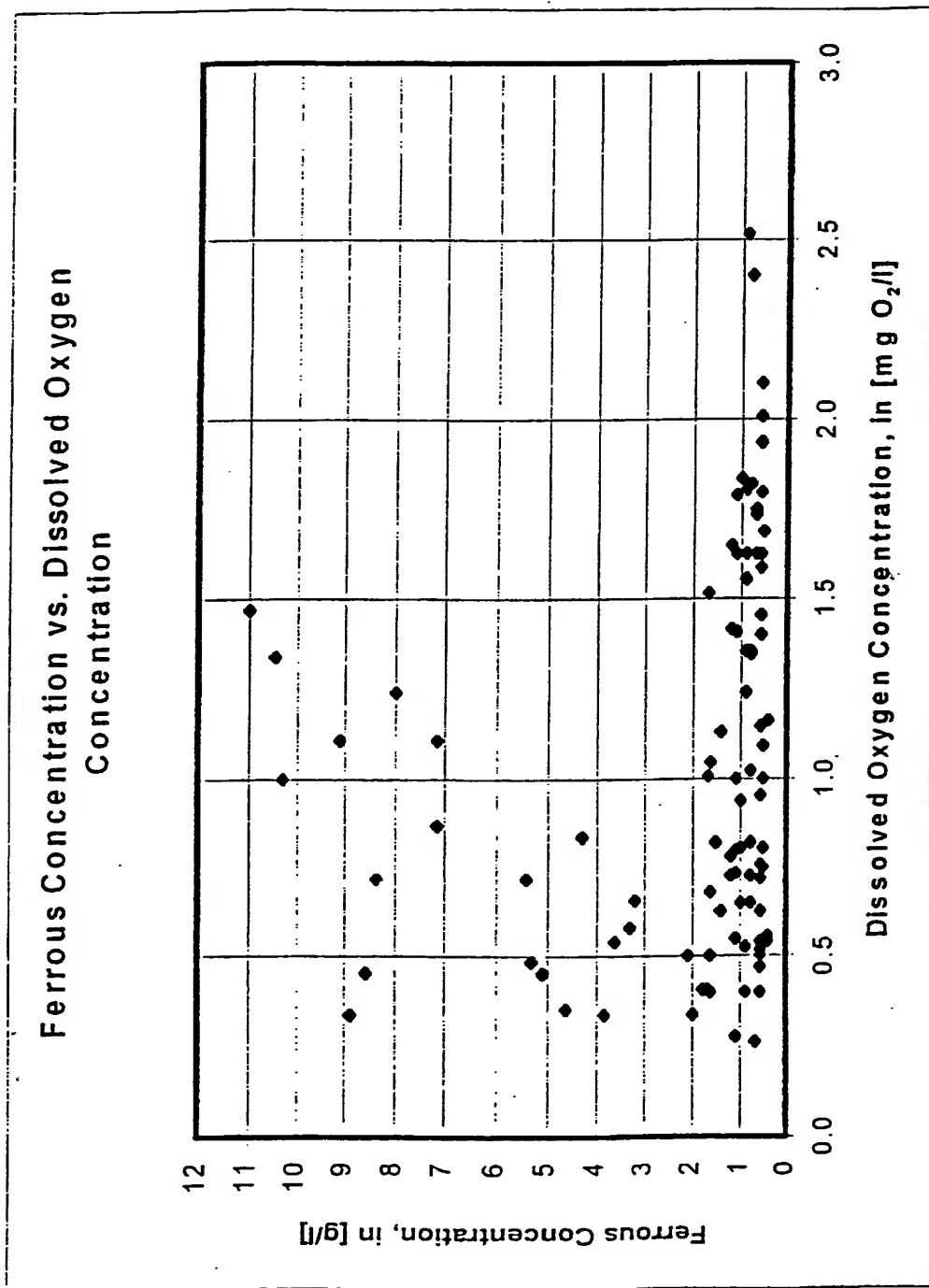


Figure 2 Results Showing The Effect of Reduced Microbial Oxidation On Iron(II) Concentration Levels In Solution As A Result Of Operating At Low Dissolved Oxygen Concentrations

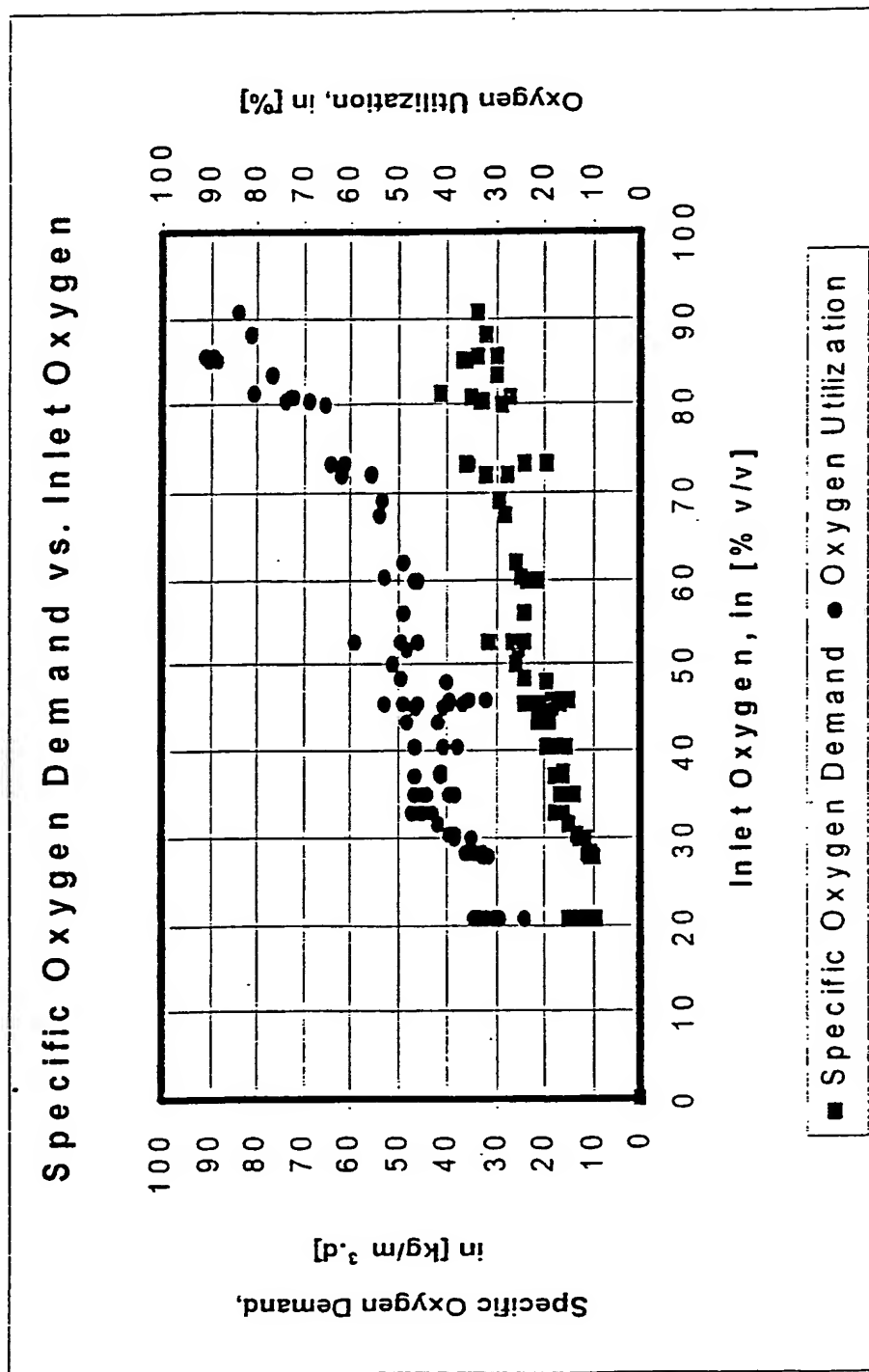


Figure 3 Results Showing The Increase In Specific Oxygen Demand and Oxygen Utilisation Achieved By Increasing The Oxygen Content Of The Inlet Gas Under Controlled Conditions By The Method Of The Invention

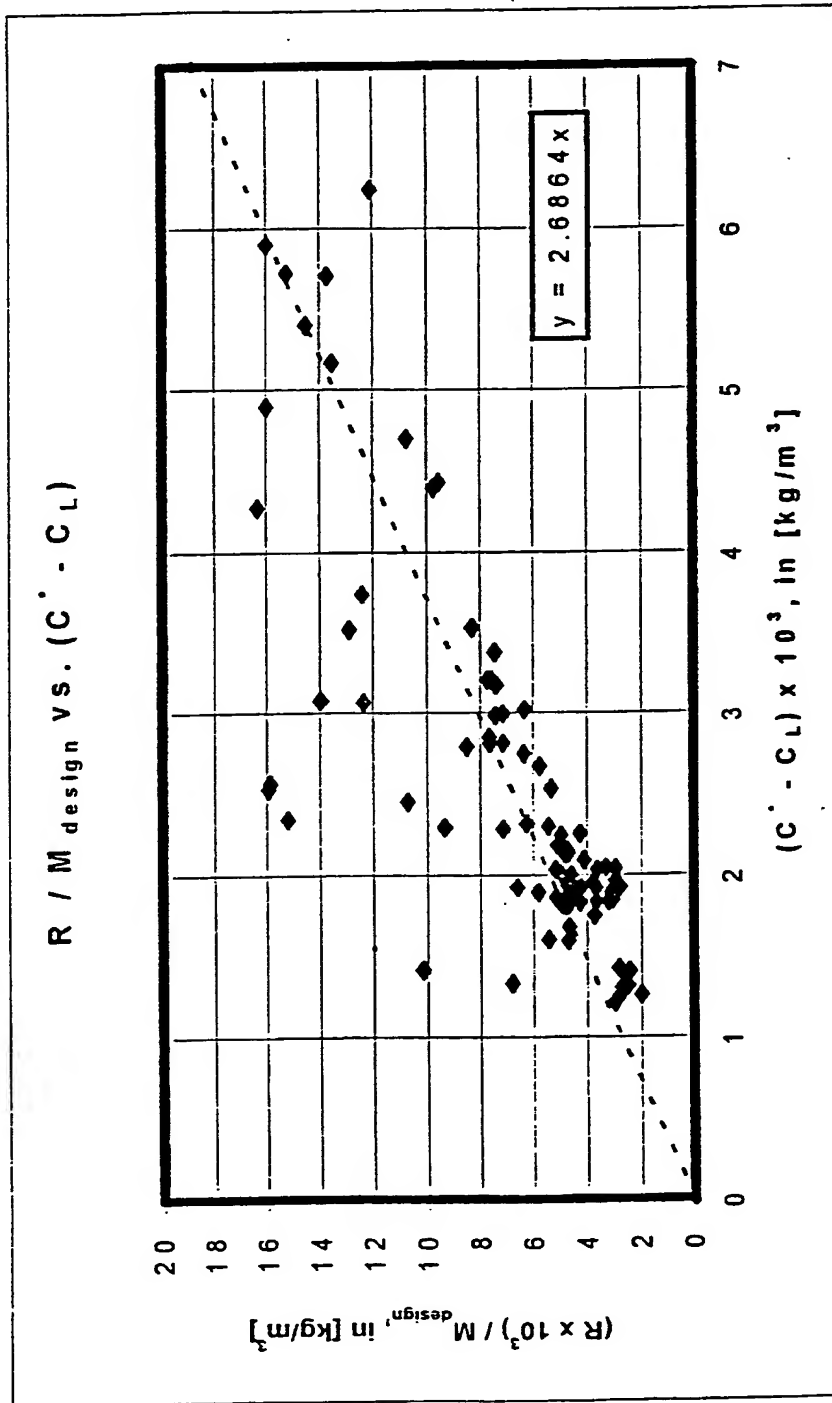
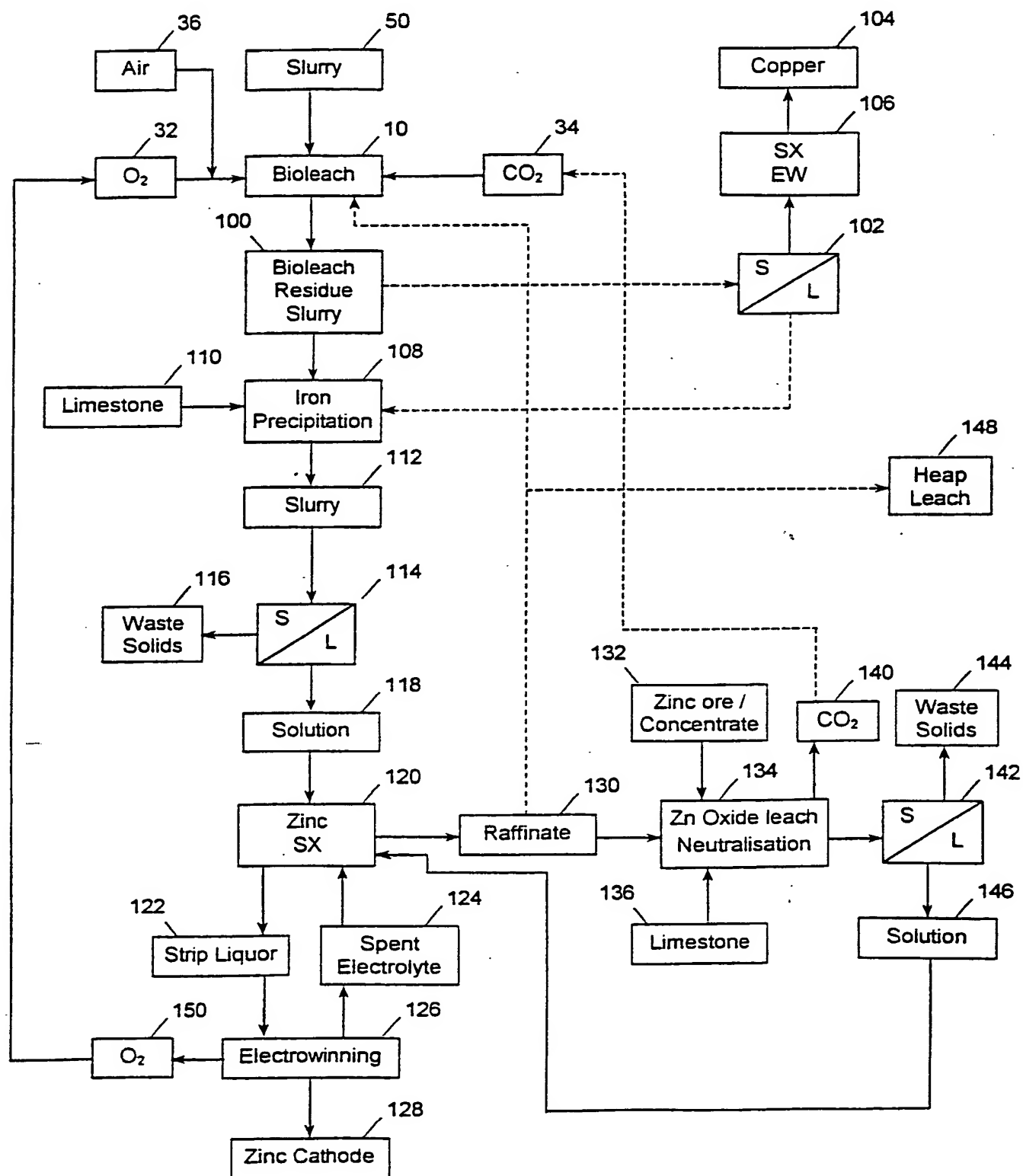


Figure 4 Results Demonstrating The Enhancement Of The Oxygen Mass Transfer Coefficient



**Figure 5**



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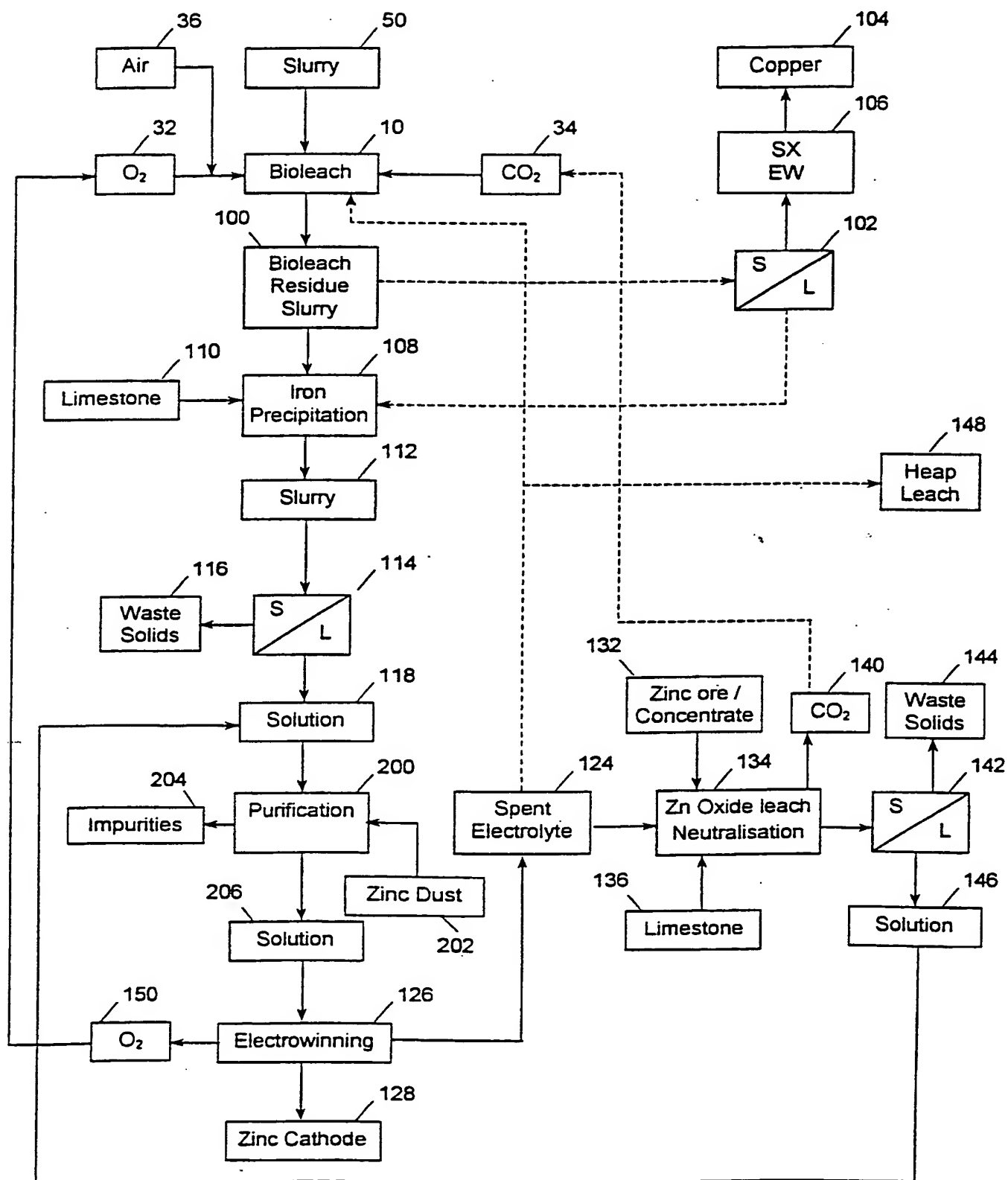


Figure 6

# PATENT COOPERATION TREATY

From the INTERNATIONAL SEARCHING AUTHORITY

# PCT

NOTIFICATION OF TRANSMITTAL OF  
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(PCT Rule 44.1)

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Applicant's or agent's file reference

INT1007/MAJR

**FOR FURTHER ACTION**

See paragraphs 1 and 4 below

International application No.

PCT/ZA 00/00160

International filing date  
(day/month/year)

05/09/2000

Applicant

BILLITON INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY B.V.

1. ☐ The applicant is hereby notified that the International Search Report has been established and is transmitted herewith.

**Filing of amendments and statement under Article 18:**

The applicant is entitled, if he so wishes, to amend the claims of the International Application (see Rule 46):

**When?** The time limit for filing such amendments is normally 2 months from the date of transmittal of the International Search Report; however, for more details, see the notes on the accompanying sheet.

**Where?** Directly to the International Bureau of WIPO  
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1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland  
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For more detailed instructions, see the notes on the accompanying sheet.

2. ☐ The applicant is hereby notified that no International Search Report will be established and that the declaration under Article 17(2)(a) to that effect is transmitted herewith.

3. ☐ With regard to the protest against payment of (an) additional fee(s) under Rule 40.2, the applicant is notified that:

☐ the protest together with the decision thereon has been transmitted to the International Bureau together with the applicant's request to forward the texts of both the protest and the decision thereon to the designated Offices.

☐ no decision has been made yet on the protest; the applicant will be notified as soon as a decision is made.

4. **Further action(s):** The applicant is reminded of the following:

Shortly after 18 months from the priority date, the International application will be published by the International Bureau. If the applicant wishes to avoid or postpone publication, a notice of withdrawal of the International application, or of the priority claim, must reach the International Bureau as provided in Rules 80bis.1 and 80bis.3, respectively, before the completion of the technical preparations for International publication.

Within 19 months from the priority date, a demand for International preliminary examination must be filed if the applicant wishes to postpone the entry into the national phase until 30 months from the priority date (in some Offices even later).

Within 20 months from the priority date, the applicant must perform the prescribed acts for entry into the national phase before all designated Offices which have not been elected in the demand or in a later election within 19 months from the priority date or could not be elected because they are not bound by Chapter II.

Name and mailing address of the International Searching Authority



European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2  
NL-2280 HV Rijswijk  
Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040, Tx. 31 651 epo nl,  
Fax: (+31-70) 340-3018

Authorized officer

Maria Van der Hoeven

## PATENT COOPERATION TREATY

PCT

## INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

(PCT Article 18 and Rules 43 and 44)

Applicant's or agent's file reference <b>INT1007/MAJR</b>		<b>FOR FURTHER ACTION</b> <small>see Notification of Transmittal of International Search Report (Form PCT/ISA/220) as well as, where applicable, item 5 below.</small>	
International application No. <b>PCT/ZA 00/00160</b>	International filing date (day/month/year) <b>05/09/2000</b>	(Earliest) Priority Date (day/month/year) <b>07/09/1999</b>	
Applicant <b>BILLITON INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY B.V.</b>			

This International Search Report has been prepared by this International Searching Authority and is transmitted to the applicant according to Article 18. A copy is being transmitted to the International Bureau.

This International Search Report consists of a total of 3 sheets.  
☒ It is also accompanied by a copy of each prior art document cited in this report.

## 1. Basis of the report

- a. With regard to the language, the international search was carried out on the basis of the international application in the language in which it was filed, unless otherwise indicated under this item.

☐ the international search was carried out on the basis of a translation of the international application furnished to this Authority (Rule 23.1(b)).

- b. With regard to any nucleotide and/or amino acid sequence disclosed in the international application, the international search was carried out on the basis of the sequence listing:

☐ contained in the international application in written form.

☐ filed together with the international application in computer readable form.

☐ furnished subsequently to this Authority in written form.

☐ furnished subsequently to this Authority in computer readable form.

☐ the statement that the subsequently furnished written sequence listing does not go beyond the disclosure in the international application as filed has been furnished.

☐ the statement that the information recorded in computer readable form is identical to the written sequence listing has been furnished.

2. ☐ Certain claims were found unsearchable (See Box I).

3. ☐ Unity of invention is lacking (see Box II).

## 4. With regard to the title,

☐ the text is approved as submitted by the applicant.

☒ the text has been established by this Authority to read as follows:

**RECOVERY OF ZINC FROM ZINC BEARING SULPHIDE MINERALS BY BIOLEACHING AND ELECTROWINNING**

## 5. With regard to the abstract,

☒ the text is approved as submitted by the applicant.

☐ the text has been established, according to Rule 38.2(b), by this Authority as it appears in Box III. The applicant may, within one month from the date of mailing of this international search report, submit comments to this Authority.

6. The figure of the drawings to be published with the abstract is Figure No.

☐ as suggested by the applicant.

☐ because the applicant failed to suggest a figure.

☒ because this figure better characterizes the invention.

5

☐ None of the figures.

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER  
IPC 7 C22B3/18 C 19/20

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)  
IPC 7 C22B

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the International search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)  
WPI Data, EPO-Internal, PAJ, COMPENDEX

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X Y  Y	<p>GB 2 225 256 A (TOLMIN MINERAL TECHNOLOGIES NV) 30 May 1990 (1990-05-30) page 1; claims 1,3-6,8-13,20-23; figures 1-8</p> <p>page 5, line 29 -page 7, line 20</p> <p>WO 94 28184 A (MIM HOLDINGS LIMITED ; STEEMSON MARK LAURENCE (AU); SHEEHAN GREGORY) 8 December 1994 (1994-12-08) the whole document</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-/-</p>	<p>1,17-19, 38-40 2-5,7-9, 11-15, 20-37, 41-49</p> <p>2-5,7-9, 11-15, 20-37, 41-49</p>

☒ Further documents are listed in the continuation of box C.

☒ Patent family members are listed in annex.

\* Special categories of cited documents:

- "A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance
- "E" earlier document but published on or after the international filing date
- "L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)
- "O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means
- "P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art.

"Z" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search

6 December 2000

Date of mailing of the international search report

13/12/2000

Name and mailing address of the ISA

European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2  
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Authorized officer

Bombeke, M

## C. (Continuation) DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	DATABASE WPI Section Ch, Week 198303 Derwent Publications Ltd., London, GB; Class D16, AN 1983-06496K XP002154056 & SU 910 815 A (MOSCOW STEEL ALLOYS INST), 7 March 1982 (1982-03-07) abstract	12, 25-29
Y	DATABASE WPI Section Ch, Week 198051 Derwent Publications Ltd., London, GB; Class M25, AN 1980-91483C XP002154057 & SU 730 848 A (AS KAZA MICROBIOL), 5 May 1980 (1980-05-05) abstract	22-34, 37, 41, 44, 45, 49
Y	DATABASE WPI Section Ch, Week 197805 Derwent Publications Ltd., London, GB; Class D16, AN 1978-08433A XP002154058 & CA 1 023 947 A (MIN RICH NAT QUEBEC), 10 January 1978 (1978-01-10) abstract	20, 21, 25-27
A		10, 16
A	DATABASE WPI Section Ch, Week 199214 Derwent Publications Ltd., London, GB; Class M25, AN 1992-110235 XP002154059 & JP 04 052291 A (AKITA SEIREN KK), 20 February 1992 (1992-02-20) abstract	6, 13

# Information on patent family members

International Application No  
PCT/ZA 00/00160

Patent document cited in search report		Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
GB 2225256	A	30-05-1990	AU 630889 B AU 4262989 A US 5021069 A ZA 8907627 A	12-11-1992 12-04-1990 04-06-1991 25-09-1991
WO 9428184	A	08-12-1994	AU 673929 B AU 6789694 A	28-11-1996 20-12-1994
SU 910815	A	07-03-1982	NONE	
SU 730848	A	30-04-1980	NONE	
CA 1023947	A	10-01-1978	NONE	
JP 4052291	A	20-02-1992	NONE	

# PATENT COOPERATION TREATY

From the  
INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY EXAMINING AUTHORITY

To:

McCALLUM RADEMEYER & FREIMOND  
P.O. Box 1130  
2125 Randburg  
AFRIQUE DU SUD

RECEIVED  
2001-01-17  
MCCALLUM, RADEMEYER  
& FREIMOND

## PCT

NOTIFICATION OF TRANSMITTAL OF  
THE INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY  
EXAMINATION REPORT  
(PCT Rule 71.1)

Date of mailing (day/month/year)	17.12.2001
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Applicant's or agent's file reference INT1007/MAJR	<b>IMPORTANT NOTIFICATION</b>
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International application No. PCT/ZA00/00160	International filing date (day/month/year) 05/09/2000	Priority date (day/month/year) 07/09/1999
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Applicant BILLITON INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY B.V.
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1. The applicant is hereby notified that this International Preliminary Examining Authority transmits herewith the international preliminary examination report and its annexes, if any, established on the international application.
2. A copy of the report and its annexes, if any, is being transmitted to the International Bureau for communication to all the elected Offices.
3. Where required by any of the elected Offices, the International Bureau will prepare an English translation of the report (but not of any annexes) and will transmit such translation to those Offices.
4. **REMINDER**  
  
The applicant must enter the national phase before each elected Office by performing certain acts (filing translations and paying national fees) within 30 months from the priority date (or later in some Offices) (Article 39(1)) (see also the reminder sent by the International Bureau with Form PCT/IB/301).

Where a translation of the international application must be furnished to an elected Office, that translation must contain a translation of any annexes to the international preliminary examination report. It is the applicant's responsibility to prepare and furnish such translation directly to each elected Office concerned.

For further details on the applicable time limits and requirements of the elected Offices, see Volume II of the PCT Applicant's Guide.

Name and mailing address of the IPEA/	Authorized officer
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Dekker, M

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# PATENT COOPERATION TREATY

## PCT

### INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION REPORT

(PCT Article 36 and Rule 70)


Applicant's or agent's file reference <b>INT1007/MAJR</b>	<b>FOR FURTHER ACTION</b> See Notification of Transmittal of International Preliminary Examination Report (Form PCT/IPEA/416)	
International application No. <b>PCT/ZA00/00160</b>	International filing date (day/month/year) <b>05/09/2000</b>	Priority date (day/month/year) <b>07/09/1999</b>
International Patent Classification (IPC) or national classification and IPC <b>C22B3/18</b>		
Applicant <b>BILLITON INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY B.V.</b>		

1. This international preliminary examination report has been prepared by this International Preliminary Examining Authority and is transmitted to the applicant according to Article 36.
2. This REPORT consists of a total of 5 sheets, including this cover sheet.
  - ☒ This report is also accompanied by ANNEXES, i.e. sheets of the description, claims and/or drawings which have been amended and are the basis for this report and/or sheets containing rectifications made before this Authority (see Rule 70.16 and Section 607 of the Administrative Instructions under the PCT).

These annexes consist of a total of 5 sheets.

3. This report contains indications relating to the following items:

- I ☒ Basis of the report
- II ☐ Priority
- III ☐ Non-establishment of opinion with regard to novelty, inventive step and industrial applicability
- IV ☐ Lack of unity of invention
- V ☒ Reasoned statement under Article 35(2) with regard to novelty, inventive step or industrial applicability; citations and explanations supporting such statement
- VI ☐ Certain documents cited
- VII ☒ Certain defects in the international application
- VIII ☒ Certain observations on the international application

Date of submission of the demand  <b>26/03/2001</b>	Date of completion of this report  <b>17.12.2001</b>
Name and mailing address of the international preliminary examining authority:   <b>European Patent Office - P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2 NL-2280 HV Rijswijk - Pays Bas Tel. +31 70 340 - 2040 Tx: 31 651 epo nl Fax: +31 70 340 - 3016</b>	Authorized officer  <b>Bombeke, M</b>  Telephone No. <b>+31 70 340 3576</b>





**INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY  
EXAMINATION REPORT**

International application No. PCT/ZA00/00160

**I. Basis of the report**

1. With regard to the **elements** of the international application (*Replacement sheets which have been furnished to the receiving Office in response to an invitation under Article 14 are referred to in this report as "originally filed" and are not annexed to this report since they do not contain amendments (Rules 70.16 and 70.17)*):

**Description, pages:**

1-24,32 as originally filed

**Claims, No.:**

1-32 with telefax of 09/10/2001

**Drawings, sheets:**

1/6-6/6 as originally filed

2. With regard to the **language**, all the elements marked above were available or furnished to this Authority in the language in which the international application was filed, unless otherwise indicated under this item.

These elements were available or furnished to this Authority in the following language: , which is:

- ☐ the language of a translation furnished for the purposes of the international search (under Rule 23.1(b)).
- ☐ the language of publication of the international application (under Rule 48.3(b)).
- ☐ the language of a translation furnished for the purposes of international preliminary examination (under Rule 55.2 and/or 55.3).

3. With regard to any **nucleotide and/or amino acid sequence** disclosed in the international application, the international preliminary examination was carried out on the basis of the sequence listing:

- ☐ contained in the international application in written form.
- ☐ filed together with the international application in computer readable form.
- ☐ furnished subsequently to this Authority in written form.
- ☐ furnished subsequently to this Authority in computer readable form.
- ☐ The statement that the subsequently furnished written sequence listing does not go beyond the disclosure in the international application as filed has been furnished.
- ☐ The statement that the information recorded in computer readable form is identical to the written sequence listing has been furnished.

4. The amendments have resulted in the cancellation of:

- ☐ the description, pages:
- ☐ the claims, Nos.:

**INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY  
EXAMINATION REPORT**

International application No. PCT/ZA00/00160

☐ the drawings, sheets:

5. ☐ This report has been established as if (some of) the amendments had not been made, since they have been considered to go beyond the disclosure as filed (Rule 70.2(c)):

*(Any replacement sheet containing such amendments must be referred to under item 1 and annexed to this report.)*

6. Additional observations, if necessary:

**V. Reasoned statement under Article 35(2) with regard to novelty, inventive step or industrial applicability; citations and explanations supporting such statement**

1. Statement

Novelty (N)	Yes: Claims 1-32
	No: Claims
Inventive step (IS)	Yes: Claims 1-32
	No: Claims
Industrial applicability (IA)	Yes: Claims 1-32
	No: Claims

2. Citations and explanations  
see separate sheet

**VII. Certain defects in the international application**

The following defects in the form or contents of the international application have been noted:  
see separate sheet

**VIII. Certain observations on the international application**

The following observations on the clarity of the claims, description, and drawings or on the question whether the claims are fully supported by the description, are made:  
see separate sheet

**INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY  
EXAMINATION REPORT - SEPARATE SHEET**

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International application No. PCT/ZA00/00160

**Re Item V**

**Reasoned statement under Article 35(2) with regard to novelty, inventive step or industrial applicability; citations and explanations supporting such statement**

Reference is made to the following documents:

D1: WO-A-9428184

D2: US-A-5007620

D3: AU-A-63007/94 (Derwent abstract)

The document D3 was not cited in the international search report. A copy of the document is appended hereto.

The document D1 is regarded as being the closest prior art to the subject-matter of claims 1-32, and discloses (see figures and claims) an integrated bioleaching, solvent extraction system for zinc recovery from Zn-bearing sulphide mineral wherein a bioleach stage is supplied with air, CO<sub>2</sub> and nutrients.

The subject-matter of "process" claims 1-30 differs from this known method by feed gas feature (b) and control feature (c) of independent claim 1.

The subject-matter of claims 31,32 to a zinc recovery plant differs from the system of D1 in that it comprises a device which measures the dissolved oxygen concentration in the bioleach reactor slurry combined with a control mechanism for feeding oxygen to the slurry in response to said measure of dissolved oxygen concentration.

It follows that the subject-matter of claims 1-32 is novel (Article 33(2) PCT).

D2 describes a process and system for the extraction of metals (in particular precious metals) from sulphide mineral slurries involving the supply of oxygen to the bioleach slurry and the control of oxygen transfer and uptake by optimised fine bubbling, but it does not propose to control the "dissolved" oxygen concentration at a particular level by controlling a feed parameter as defined in step (c) of claim 1.

D3 describes a bioreactor provided with oxygen sensing devices to measure the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry but does not disclose a control mechanism operating in response to said measured oxygen concentration values.

It follows that the combination of either one of D2 and D3 with D3 will not obviously lead to a method and plant for the recovery of zinc as defined in claims 1-32.

Consequently claims 1-32 involve an inventive step in the sense of Article 33(3) PCT.

**INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY  
EXAMINATION REPORT - SEPARATE SHEET**

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International application No. PCT/ZA00/00160

**Re Item VII**

**Certain defects in the international application**

Contrary to the requirements of Rule 5.1(a)(ii) PCT, the relevant background art disclosed in the documents D1, D2 and D3 is not mentioned in the description, nor are these documents identified therein.

**Re Item VIII**

**Certain observations on the international application**

Claim 31 does not meet the requirements of Article 6 PCT in that the matter for which protection is sought is not clearly defined. The following functional statements do not enable the skilled person to determine which technical features are necessary to perform the stated functions:

- control mechanism whereby in response ...
- recovery system which recovers zinc

Moreover the bioleach reactor vessel of the plant according to independent claim 31 is not clearly defined in that essential reactor device features (see figure 1) are missing which is contrary to the provisions of Article 6 PCT taken in combination with Rule 6(3)(b) PCT.

- 1/1 - (C) WPI / DERWENT  
AN - 1995-023284 [20]  
AP - AU19940063007 19940510; AU19940063007 19940510; [Previous Publ. AU9463007 ]  
PR - AU19930009072 19930528  
TI - Appts. for continuously measuring oxygen@ consumption in oxygenated material - including plug flow reactor, pump means for test liq. stream, oxygenator, liq. flow rate measuring means, at least two dissolved oxygen@ sensors, etc.  
IW - APPARATUS CONTINUOUS MEASURE OXYGEN@ CONSUME OXYGENATE MATERIAL PLUG FLOW REACTOR PUMP TEST LIQUID STREAM OXYGENATE LIQUID FLOW RATE MEASURE TWO DISSOLVE OXYGEN@ SENSE  
PA - (COMM-N) COMMONWEALTH IND GASES LTD  
PN - AU6300794 A 19941201 DW199504 G01N33/18 021pp  
- AU665907 B 19960118 DW199620 G01N33/18 000pp  
IC - C02F1/74 ; C02F3/26 ; G01N33/18  
AB - AU9463007 Device for measuring O<sub>2</sub> consumption rate in an oxygenated liq. or slurry (8) comprises: (a) a plug flow reactor (2) consisting of a length of pipe (3) between an inlet (4) and an outlet (5); (b) a means to pump a liq. test stream through (a); (c) an oxygenator (11) to admit O<sub>2</sub> to the test stream; (d) dissolved O<sub>2</sub> sensors provided at spaced points in the reactor to measure the dissolved oxygen at those points; (e) a flow meter (20) measuring the rate of liq. flow past the sensors; (f) flow reversal means to selectively reverse flow of liq.; and (g) control and monitoring means.  
- Also claimed is the process for measuring O<sub>2</sub> consumption using the above appts..  
- USE - Used for measuring the O<sub>2</sub> consumption rate in chemical and biological processes e.g. oxidn. of mineral slurries, partic. solidification of dissolved and suspended pollutants in sewage and waste water treatment, etc..  
- ADVANTAGE - Allows O<sub>2</sub> consumption to be continuously measured to ensure complete treatment while avoiding supply of excessive O<sub>2</sub> which is expensive.  
- (Dwg.1/1)

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1

# CLAIMS

1. A method of recovering zinc from a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry which includes the steps of:
  - (a) subjecting the slurry in a reactor to a bioleaching process at a temperature in excess of 40°C;
  - 5 (b) supplying a feed gas which contains in excess of 21% oxygen by volume, to the slurry;
  - (c) controlling the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry at a level of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $10 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  by controlling at least one of the following: the oxygen content of the feed gas, the supply of feed gas to the slurry; the rate of feed of slurry to the reactor; and
  - (d) recovering zinc from a bioleach residue of the bioleaching process.
- 10 2. A method according to claim 1 wherein copper is removed from the bioleach residue before recovering zinc therefrom.
3. A method according to claim 1 or 2 which includes the step of removing iron from the bioleach  
15 residue before recovering zinc therefrom.
4. A method according to claim 3 wherein the iron is precipitated from the bioleach residue by the addition of limestone to the residue.
- 20 5. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 4 which the bioleach residue is subjected to a recovery process which includes zinc solvent extraction and zinc electrowinning to produce zinc metal cathodes.
- 25 6. A method according to claim 5 wherein oxygen generated during the zinc electrowinning is fed to the feed gas of step (b) or directly to the slurry.
7. A method according to claim 5 or 6 wherein raffinate, produced during the zinc solvent extraction, is supplied to at least one of the following: the bioleaching process of step (a), an external heap leach process, and a zinc oxide leach stage.

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2

8. A method according to any one of claims 5 to 7 wherein acid in raffinate, produced during the zinc solvent extraction, is neutralized to produce gypsum and carbon dioxide, and to precipitate co-leached iron.

5 9. A method according to claim 8 wherein the neutralisation is effected by adding limestone or zinc oxide ore or concentrate to the raffinate.

10. A method according to claim 8 or 9 wherein at least some of the carbon dioxide is supplied to the bioleaching process of step (a).

10

11. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 4 wherein the bioleach residue is subjected to zinc dust purification by precipitation and electrowinning to produce zinc metal cathodes.

15

12. A method according to claim 11 wherein spent electrolyte from the zinc electrowinning is supplied to at least one of the following: the bioleaching process of step (a), an external heap leach process, and a zinc oxide leach stage.

13. A method according to claim 11 or 12 wherein oxygen generated during the zinc electrowinning is fed to the feed gas of step (b), or directly to the slurry.

20

14. A method according to any one of claims 11 to 13 wherein spent electrolyte, from the zinc electrowinning, is neutralised to produce gypsum and carbon dioxide, and to precipitate co-leached iron.

25

15. A method according to claim 14 wherein the neutralisation is effected by adding limestone or zinc oxide ore or concentrate to the spent electrolyte.

16. A method according to claim 14 or 15 wherein at least some of the carbon dioxide is supplied to the bioleaching process of step (a).

Printed: 12-12-2001

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INT 1007/MAJR/2<sup>m</sup>

3

17. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 16 wherein the feed gas in step (b) contains in excess of 85% oxygen by volume.
18. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 17 which includes the step of controlling the carbon content of the slurry.
19. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 18 which includes the step of controlling the carbon dioxide content of the feed gas in the range of from 0.5% to 5.0% by volume.
20. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 19 wherein the bioleaching process is carried out at a temperature in the range of from 40°C to 100°C.
21. A method according to claim 20 wherein the said temperature is in the range of from 60°C to 85°C.
22. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 19 which includes the step of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature of up to 45°C using mesophile microorganisms.
23. A method according to claim 22 wherein the microorganisms are selected from the following genus groups: *Acidithiobacillus*; *Thiobacillus*; *Leptospirillum*; *Ferromicrobium*; and *Acidiphilium*.
24. A method according to claim 22 or 23 wherein the said microorganisms are selected from the following species: *Acidithiobacillus caldus* (*Thiobacillus caldus*); *Acidithiobacillus thiooxidans* (*Thiobacillus thiooxidans*); *Acidithiobacillus ferrooxidans* (*Thiobacillus ferrooxidans*); *Acidithiobacillus acidophilus* (*Thiobacillus acidophilus*); *Thiobacillus prosperus*; *Leptospirillum ferrooxidans*; *Ferromicrobium acidophilus*; and *Acidiphilium cryptum*.
25. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 20 which includes the step of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature of from 45°C to 60°C using moderate thermophile microorganisms.



INT. 1007/MAJR/C

4

26. A method according to claim 25 wherein the microorganisms are selected from the following genus groups: *Acidithiobacillus* (formerly *Thiobacillus*); *Acidimicrobium*; *Sulfobacillus*; *Ferroplasma* (*Ferriplasma*); and *Alicyclobacillus*.

5 27. A method according to claim 25 or 26 wherein the said microorganisms are selected from the following species: *Acidithiobacillus caldus* (formerly *Thiobacillus caldus*); *Acidimicrobium ferrooxidans*; *Sulfobacillus acidophilus*; *Sulfobacillus disulfidooxidans*; *Sulfobacillus thermosulfidooxidans*; *Ferroplasma acidarmanus*; *Thermoplasma acidophilum*; and *Alicyclobacillus acidocaldarius*.

10

28. A method according to claim 21 which includes the step of bioleaching the slurry at a temperature of from 60°C to 85°C using thermophilic microorganisms.

15 29. A method according to claim 28 wherein the microorganisms are selected from the following genus groups: *Acidothermus*; *Sulfolobus*; *Metallosphaera*; *Acidianus*; *Ferroplasma* (*Ferriplasma*); *Thermoplasma*; and *Picrophilus*.

20 30. A method according to claim 28 or 29 wherein the said microorganisms are selected from the following species: *Sulfolobus metallicus*; *Sulfolobus acidocaldarius*; *Sulfolobus thermosulfidooxidans*; *Acidianus infernus*; *Metallosphaera sedula*; *Ferroplasma acidarmanus*; *Thermoplasma acidophilum*; *Thermoplasma volcanium*; and *Picrophilus oshimae*.

25 31. A plant for recovering zinc from a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry which includes a reactor vessel, a source which feeds a zinc bearing sulphide mineral slurry to the vessel wherein a bioleaching process is carried out at a temperature in excess of 40°C, an oxygen source which supplies oxygen in the form of oxygen enriched gas or substantially pure oxygen to the slurry, a device which measures the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry in the vessel, a control mechanism whereby, in response to the said measure of dissolved oxygen concentration, the supply

Printed:12-12-2001

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INT.1007/MAJR/2<sup>nd</sup>

5

of oxygen from the oxygen source to the slurry is controlled to achieve a dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry at a level of from  $0.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$  to  $10 \times 10^{-3} \text{ kg/m}^3$ , and a recovery system which recovers zinc from a bioleach residue from the reactor vessel.

- 5 32. A plant according to claim 31 wherein the reactor vessel is operated at a temperature in excess of  $60^\circ\text{C}$ .

PATENT COOPERATION TREATY

PCT


INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION REPORT

(PCT Article 36 and Rule 70)

Applicant's or agent's file reference INT1007/MAJR		See Notification of Transmittal of International Preliminary Examination Report (Form PCT/IPEA/416) <b>FOR FURTHER ACTION</b>	
International application No. PCT/ZA00/00160	International filing date (day/month/year) 05/09/2000	Priority date (day/month/year) 07/09/1999	
International Patent Classification (IPC) or national classification and IPC C22B3/18			
Applicant BILLITON INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY B.V.			

1. This international preliminary examination report has been prepared by this International Preliminary Examining Authority and is transmitted to the applicant according to Article 36.
2. This REPORT consists of a total of 5 sheets, including this cover sheet.  
  
☒ This report is also accompanied by ANNEXES, i.e. sheets of the description, claims and/or drawings which have been amended and are the basis for this report and/or sheets containing rectifications made before this Authority (see Rule 70.16 and Section 607 of the Administrative Instructions under the PCT).  
  
 These annexes consist of a total of 5 sheets.

3. This report contains indications relating to the following items:
  - I ☒ Basis of the report
  - II ☐ Priority
  - III ☐ Non-establishment of opinion with regard to novelty, inventive step and industrial applicability
  - IV ☐ Lack of unity of invention
  - V ☒ Reasoned statement under Article 35(2) with regard to novelty, inventive step or industrial applicability; citations and explanations supporting such statement
  - VI ☐ Certain documents cited
  - VII ☒ Certain defects in the international application
  - VIII ☒ Certain observations on the international application

Date of submission of the demand  26/03/2001	Date of completion of this report  17.12.2001
Name and mailing address of the international preliminary examining authority:   European Patent Office - P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2 NL-2280 HV Rijswijk - Pays Bas Tel. +31 70 340 - 2040 Tx: 31 651 epo nl Fax: +31 70 340 - 3016	Authorized officer  Bombeke, M  Telephone No. +31 70 340 3576



# INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION REPORT

International application No. PCT/ZA00/00160

## I. Basis of the report

1. With regard to the **elements** of the international application (*Replacement sheets which have been furnished to the receiving Office in response to an invitation under Article 14 are referred to in this report as "originally filed" and are not annexed to this report since they do not contain amendments (Rules 70.16 and 70.17)*):  
**Description, pages:**

1-24,32 as originally filed

### **Claims, No.:**

1-32 with telefax of 09/10/2001

### **Drawings, sheets:**

1/6-6/6 as originally filed

2. With regard to the **language**, all the elements marked above were available or furnished to this Authority in the language in which the international application was filed, unless otherwise indicated under this item.

These elements were available or furnished to this Authority in the following language: , which is:

- ☐ the language of a translation furnished for the purposes of the international search (under Rule 23.1(b)).
- ☐ the language of publication of the international application (under Rule 48.3(b)).
- ☐ the language of a translation furnished for the purposes of international preliminary examination (under Rule 55.2 and/or 55.3).

3. With regard to any **nucleotide and/or amino acid sequence** disclosed in the international application, the international preliminary examination was carried out on the basis of the sequence listing:

- ☐ contained in the international application in written form.
- ☐ filed together with the international application in computer readable form.
- ☐ furnished subsequently to this Authority in written form.
- ☐ furnished subsequently to this Authority in computer readable form.
- ☐ The statement that the subsequently furnished written sequence listing does not go beyond the disclosure in the international application as filed has been furnished.
- ☐ The statement that the information recorded in computer readable form is identical to the written sequence listing has been furnished.

4. The amendments have resulted in the cancellation of:

- ☐ the description, pages:
- ☐ the claims, Nos.:

# INTERNATIONAL PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION REPORT

International application No. PCT/ZA00/00

☐ the drawings, sheets:

5. ☐ This report has been established as if (some of) the amendments had not been made, since they have been considered to go beyond the disclosure as filed (Rule 70.2(c)):

*(Any replacement sheet containing such amendments must be referred to under item 1 and annexed to this report.)*

6. Additional observations, if necessary:

## V. Reasoned statement under Article 35(2) with regard to novelty, inventive step or industrial applicability; citations and explanations supporting such statement

### 1. Statement

Novelty (N)	Yes:	Claims	1-32
	No:	Claims	
Inventive step (IS)	Yes:	Claims	1-32
	No:	Claims	
Industrial applicability (IA)	Yes:	Claims	1-32
	No:	Claims	

2. Citations and explanations  
**see separate sheet**

## VII. Certain defects in the international application

The following defects in the form or contents of the international application have been noted:  
**see separate sheet**

## VIII. Certain observations on the international application

The following observations on the clarity of the claims, description, and drawings or on the question whether the claims are fully supported by the description, are made:  
**see separate sheet**

**Re Item V**

**Reasoned statement under Article 35(2) with regard to novelty, inventive step or industrial applicability; citations and explanations supporting such statement**

Reference is made to the following documents:

D1: WO-A-9428184

D2: US-A-5007620

D3: AU-A-63007/94 (Derwent abstract)

The document D3 was not cited in the international search report. A copy of the document is appended hereto.

The document D1 is regarded as being the closest prior art to the subject-matter of claims 1-32, and discloses (see figures and claims) an integrated bioleaching, solvent extraction system for zinc recovery from Zn-bearing sulphide mineral wherein a bioleach stage is supplied with air, CO<sub>2</sub> and nutrients.

The subject-matter of "process" claims 1-30 differs from this known method by feed gas feature (b) and control feature (c) of independent claim 1.

The subject-matter of claims 31,32 to a zinc recovery plant differs from the system of D1 in that it comprises a device which measures the dissolved oxygen concentration in the bioleach reactor slurry combined with a control mechanism for feeding oxygen to the slurry in response to said measure of dissolved oxygen concentration.

It follows that the subject-matter of claims 1-32 is novel (Article 33(2) PCT).

D2 describes a process and system for the extraction of metals (in particular precious metals) from sulphide mineral slurries involving the supply of oxygen to the bioleach slurry and the control of oxygen transfer and uptake by optimised fine bubbling, but it does not propose to control the "dissolved" oxygen concentration at a particular level by controlling a feed parameter as defined in step (c) of claim 1.

D3 describes a bioreactor provided with oxygen sensing devices to measure the dissolved oxygen concentration in the slurry but does not disclose a control mechanism operating in response to said measured oxygen concentration values.

It follows that the combination of either one of D2 and D3 with D3 will not obviously lead to a method and plant for the recovery of zinc as defined in claims 1-32.

Consequently claims 1-32 involve an inventive step in the sense of Article 33(3) PCT.

**Re Item VII**

**Certain defects in the international application**

Contrary to the requirements of Rule 5.1(a)(ii) PCT, the relevant background art disclosed in the documents D1, D2 and D3 is not mentioned in the description, nor are these documents identified therein.

**Re Item VIII**

**Certain observations on the international application**

Claim 31 does not meet the requirements of Article 6 PCT in that the matter for which protection is sought is not clearly defined. The following functional statements do not enable the skilled person to determine which technical features are necessary to perform the stated functions:

- control mechanism whereby in response ...
- recovery system which recovers zinc

Moreover the bioleach reactor vessel of the plant according to independent claim 31 is not clearly defined in that essential reactor device features (see figure 1) are missing which is contrary to the provisions of Article 6 PCT taken in combination with Rule 6(3)(b) PCT.